

Til death do us part by feminita

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Aged-Up Character(s), Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - No Powers, Angst with a Happy Ending, F/M, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, Happy Ending, Mileven, Sharing a Bed, Suicide Attempt, el is a precious bean, may be triggering, protect mike wheeler

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-06

Updated: 2018-01-31

Packaged: 2022-04-20 16:34:43

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 11

Words: 39,477

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

When Mike woke up in a hospital bed, he didn't think his life would be turned upside down. However, as he tries to figure out how to go back to normal, he meets El, a sweet, cheerful girl who makes life suddenly seem not that bad.

Will they be able to figure out how to solve this mess or will Mike run out of time?

(I suck at summaries but please give this story a chance!)

1. Bring me to life

Author's Note:

Hello there! Thanks for wanting to read my story. This is the first time I attempt to write any kind of fanfiction (and I had never thought about doing so) but I'm a sucker for Mileven and this idea wouldn't leave my mind, so I gave it a try. This story touches a triggering topic, so if you are easily affected by suicide and/or depression, I would recommend you read another fanfic (there are tons of amazing ones here on ao3!)

English is not my first language, so I'm really sorry if I made any mistakes while writing this (and I'd love you to point them out so I can improve my english skills (:)

Disoriented. That's the first feeling Mike Wheeler had when he opened his eyes. He's inside a white, unfamiliar room, which he soon realizes is a hospital room. He can't remember how or when he got there, until the memories from the previous night start to kick in. *Blood. Blood, so much blood.* "Of course," he thought, "I failed even trying to kill myself."

He didn't know when the depression had started; he just knew he hadn't been feeling well for at least ten years. He remembers the way his friends were always laughing and going out while he lacked the energy to even plan their beloved D & D campaigns. He didn't have a bad life, at least nothing out of the ordinary: a father who'd rather lay down in his La-Z-Boy rather than have an actual conversation with him, one or two mouthbreather bullies who liked to pick up on him and his party. There were worse problems, he believed, and he wouldn't throw himself a pity party.

Being thirteen and depressed was rough, but being a twenty three college graduate with an even worse depression was definitely harder. He had tried to get help with a hundred different therapists over the years, he had talked about it with his parents, his friends

and even his sister Nancy, but no amount of talking seemed to make things better.

Then came the pills. Not only did they erase the void in his stomach and the lump in his throat, but they also cancelled every other emotion, the good and the bad ones.

So that's how he had been living his life up until that very moment: emotionless. At least feeling nothing was better than being sad. *Empty.*

Even with his sadness gone, he was still miserable. There was a heavy feeling that refused to live his insides despite any pill he would take. He had thought about ending his life a couple times, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it, at least not until yesterday. He felt so tired of living that kind of life and he just couldn't see any way out. The razor shone under the dim bathroom light, so tempting that he just couldn't resist.

That's where his sister had found him a few minutes later, passed out inside the bathtub.

He tried to call the nurse with the button next to his bed, but when he pressed it, nothing happened. He tried again and again until he realized it must have broken. Being as stubborn as he was and deciding he didn't want to spend more time lying on that uncomfortable hospital bed, he got up, expecting to feel the needles inside his hand pop out and being prepared for the pain they would cause. However, he was surprised for what he felt, or rather, what he didn't feel. He felt light, no pain whatsoever in his body, not even his usual back pain he had been having ever since he could remember. He felt light, weightless, almost relaxed, until he looked down at the bed where he previously was.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he was about to see: *himself*. He could still see his body on that bed, with his eyes closed and every machine a human being can name connected to his body.

He pinched his own arm as a desperate move in order to wake up, but nothing happened. "This has to be a punishment for last night's actions", he decided. "What the fuck is going on? Is this real life?"

Have I died and gone to hell?”, he then asked himself. Nervousness took over his body, and he did the first thing he could think of: he ran out of the room, away from his sleeping form.

He saw that his parents and his older sister were right outside the door. His mother, Karen, and his sister Nancy were crying, while his father, Ted, had bloodshot eyes. He felt a wave of relief washing over him, and he spoke. “Mom! Dad! Nancy! I’m so glad to see you, you won’t believe what’s happening. There is another Mike sleeping inside that room, please come with me and I’ll show you, I don’t know what-“ he abruptly stopped, frozen with fear as he realized they couldn’t hear him. They didn’t even seem to acknowledge his presence. He heard them talking about him, how afraid they were about him never waking up from his...

Coma?

A fucking coma?

Giving that his own family couldn’t see he was there, he wasn’t surprised when he found out that he was seemingly invisible to the rest of the world. He walked past some nurses, the secretary and even the front door’s security guard and was totally unnoticed. Not even the people outside that damned hospital seem to notice him. Feeling hopeless and not wanting to see the Hawkins Grand Hospital sign anymore, he walked aimlessly for a while trying (and failing) to get someone’s attention.

“Help! Can somebody please help me!?” he yelled, but nobody even looked his way. He then tried to grab some middle aged woman who was walking past him, but his touch seemed to have no effect on her. Growing more and more scared and frustrated every minute that passed, he sat on a bench and did something he hadn’t done in years: he broke down crying.

While Mike Wheeler’s life was changing forever, twenty two year-old Jane “El” Hopper was having a normal day inside a bar two blocks away from the hospital. She worked there as a waitress, and in spite of having to deal with some rude customers every once in a while, she quite liked it. The owner, Benny, was a kind man who had known her ever since she moved to Hawkins to live with her adoptive father,

Jim. Benny was the first person to ever make her feel like she belonged there, while the other residents couldn't stop looking at her as if she had suddenly grown another head. Everybody seemed to know about her when she first moved in seven years ago, the Chief of Police adopting a new kid being the juiciest gossip in such a small town.

She understood the commotion, though. She knew that Jim's previous daughter had passed away years ago, and she could also see that not all people adopt a sixteen year-old teenager out of the blue. However, as the days passed, her arrival became old news. She tried to keep a low profile, and everybody forgot about the mysterious new girl rather sooner than later. Being homeschooled also helped her go unnoticed. She was a junior and had always been homeschooled (more like *foster-schooled*) and she decided she wanted to keep it that way.

Socializing at college was hard for her, but soon enough she met Max, a girl who had just moved from California and also felt like an outsider, and they became attached to the hip.

She had graduated some months ago with a major in psychology and a minor in speech therapy, and decided to work at Benny's before she could find a job related to what she truly wanted to work as. That particular day had been quiet, without enough customers to save her from boredom. As she was falling asleep on a vacant table, she heard Benny speak. "El, honey, go home. Nobody seems to be coming in today and your shift is about to end anyway", he told her.

"Don't you need help in the kitchen? I can clean the tables or wash the dishes if you'd like"

"Nonsense! You've been a perfect employee ever since you started working here, so you deserve some rest. Really, I've got it under control" he said while ruffling El's curls.

"You're the best boss to ever exist, Ben. Thank you so much. I'll see you tomorrow". She kissed Benny's cheek, waved goodbye to the other employees and went out the door. She felt the autumn's breeze and immediately hummed with contentment. It was definitely her favorite season, all those pretty colored leaves falling to the ground,

just enough cold for her to enjoy it, and getting to wear those beautiful sweaters and scarves she *loved*.

Just as she was heading home (her tiny apartment she didn't quite like but that made her oh so independent from her father), she saw him. A boy about her age, who was wearing an awful hospital gown, was crying his eyes off. No, she corrected herself, not just crying, but sobbing uncontrollably. Her heart broke by the sight and she debated silently whether or not to approach him. The debate was cut abruptly when he got his hands out of his face and looked up.

Wow, was all she could think about.

Despite having his eyes completely bloodshot from all that crying, she could see that they were pitch black and as enchanting as a midnight sky. His tear stained cheeks were also covered in the most adorable freckles, which were the perfect stars to complete the sky in his eyes. He was all sharp angles and pale skin, and El couldn't help but feel drawn to him, like and otherworldly force had brought her there for that specific moment.

If that alone wasn't enough, he frantically looked at everyone who walked in front of him and started screaming, pleading for someone to help him. El couldn't help but wonder how everybody could go on walking without even giving him a second look. Within a fraction of a second, she woke up from her trance and walked right to him.

When Mike had given up and stopped yelling at every passerby (without succeeding, may he add), he looked to his left and saw that a girl had her eyes fixed on him and was walking straight to where he was sitting. And what a girl she was. He seemed to forget all about his misery for a second.

Fuck, he thought, *she's so pretty*.

But pretty didn't make her justice. She had big, brown, doe like eyes, which seemed to be burning a hole through him, as if she could see his soul. Her lips were big, pouty and looked so *soft* and *inviting* and all he could think about was how they would feel on his. She was dressed cutely, with her oversized woolen sweater and a pair of jeans, but he could also see the great figure she hid underneath her clothes.

She was the perfect mixture between beautiful and hot and-

“Um, hi, are you okay? You seem to be having a hard day” she told him.

“I... uh- I...” was all he could stutter say.

“I saw you asking for help, and as nobody stopped to help you I thought I could come and ask what’s wrong”. That broke him out of his trance. This girl was the only person who could hear him, and she was his key to salvation.

“Thank you! Thank you so much! You have no idea how much I was waiting for this, you’re like a guardian angel” She quirked her eyebrows in amusement and he suddenly wanted to slap himself.

An angel? Way to go, Wheeler.

“I know that I may sound crazy, but I swear that I’m not joking”, he continued. “I think you’re the only person here than can see me”.

Nice, she thought, this guy must have had a mental break down and is now delusional. “I’m sorry, I don’t quite understand what you’re trying to tell me. You think you’re invisible for the rest of the world and that I’m the only person who can see you?” she asked in disbelief.

“I know it sounds crazy, but think about it this way: why has nobody helped me when I was screaming for help? Why did nobody even turned to look at me? You must admit, a sobbing man wearing a hospital gown in the middle of the street is not something most people would ignore. Also, why is everybody looking at you as if you were a lunatic taking to herself?” he pointed out.

When El tore her gaze from the helpless guy, she could see that he was right. People were looking at her as if she was unaccompanied, having a conversation with someone who wasn’t there. She looked back to the boy, mouth agape, as she tried to process everything that was happening.

“I need you to help me” he told her, voice cracking with emotion at the end of the sentence, “*please*”.

As she looked him in the eye, she could see the need and desperation he was feeling. Fucking hell, she had no choice. “Okay, fine, I’ll help you. I live near here, just some blocks away. Come with me to my apartment and we’ll figure things out” she said, “But first, I need to know two things about you”.

Mike couldn’t believe his luck, just as he couldn’t stop the smile that had begun to form in his face. “Whatever you want, ask and I’ll tell you”.

That smile, she admired in her mind. Someone with a smile so pretty and genuine couldn’t be dangerous, right? “I want to know what your name is and if you’re a serial killer. You know, safety first” she found herself saying as she broke into a smile of her own.

He couldn’t help but grin at her sense of humor and focus his gaze on that crooked but captivating smile she was giving him. “I’m Mike, Mike Wheeler and no, I have never killed a fly, let alone a person”.

“Nice to meet you, Mike Wheeler. I’m El Hopper, and my father is the Chief of Police so you’d better be telling the truth or you’ll be the one who’ll end up six feet underground” she joked, but by the look on his face, she could tell that she had chosen a bad subject to joke about.

Well, she thought as she started leading him to her apartment, *here goes nothing*.

2. Hey, I just met you (and this is crazy)

Notes for the Chapter:

(yes, I used a line from that call me maybe song to name this chapter)

Eleven started regretting having let Mike inside her apartment the minute he began telling her about his crazy experience. “Great job, El” she thought, “you’ve just let a maniac into your home”. However, she could also sense the desperation in his voice, which led her to think that maybe, just maybe, he was telling the truth.

“So, let me get this straight. You’re telling me you woke up in a hospital bed, then left the room and nobody could see you there?” she asked in disbelief.

“For the hundredth time, yes, that’s what I’m trying to say” Mike said, beginning to lose his patience. “I think I may be half dead, and I just need to figure out how to gain control of my body and go back to being a normal human”

“And you expect me to believe you? Don’t act like I’m the one who is crazy when you know that what you’re saying is *impossible*” El began raising her voice, but then took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “Look, I know I said I would help you, but I think you should leave” she said, and she could instantly see sheer terror on the boy’s face

“Please, I *beg* you, let me prove that what I’m saying is real. If I can’t, then you can kick me out of your apartment whenever you please” Mike pleaded

She had considered making him leave without giving him the chance to even talk again, but seeing his desperate state, she gave in. “Fine, if you can convince me that this crazy story truly happened, I will help you sort it out. If you can’t, I want you back on the street as soon as possible”.

Instantly, Mike began thinking of ways he could show that he was in

fact living a real life nightmare. He needed to show her that he was, indeed, Mike Wheeler and that somehow his body was still lying inside one of Hawkins Grand Hospital's rooms.

He couldn't come up with a way to show her what was really going on, and El was growing more and more impatient as time passed and she still didn't have solid proof of his sayings. Just as he was about to lose all hope, he came up with an idea. "I know!" he exclaimed, "go get your cellphone and open Facebook. There you can look my name up and see my profile"

"And that helps because..."

"Do it and I'll explain later" he told her.

And so she did. As she was typing his name on the search section, a possible result popped up. She clicked on it, and upon seeing the profile picture she had no doubt that she had found the correct profile. The photo wasn't anything special, just a picture of what she supposed was his family and him, but what drew her attention was his expression.

Sad, he looks sad.

Even though she wanted to ask him about it, she decided to focus on the main thing she came looking for: an answer to this crazy thing she was experiencing.

"Alright," she said "here it is. I can see that this profile is definitely yours and that you really are Mike. But how does this prove that all the other things you said aren't complete bullshit?"

Mike snorted upon hearing her sassy question. "Now, call the hospital. Ask about Mike Wheeler, maybe what room he's in or whether he's still in a coma. If they tell you that I'm hospitalized there, will you finally believe me?"

After a minute of consideration, El nodded her head in response to the boy's suggestion. She quickly looked up the hospital's phone number and called right away. A few rings later, a woman picked up.

"Hawkins Grand Hospital, how can I help you?"

"Hi, um, I was calling because I think a good friend of mine is hospitalized there and I would like to know how he is"

"Okay sweetie, could you tell me his name?" the lady asked

"Yeah, of course, Mike Wheeler"

"Let me look his name up in a second and I'll be right back with you" the woman said, the sound of typing sounding softly in the back.

While El waited, she looked at Mike, who was standing beside her, anxiously fiddling with his fingers. Noticing her stare, he looked down at her, suddenly remembering something. "Room 2510" he told her, "that's where I am. I saw the number before leaving"

Before she could say something back, she heard the woman speak again. "I'm sorry it took me long to find him, dear, he's been here only for a couple of hours and has just been registered in the system. Mike's here, but I regret to tell you he's in a coma. If you want to come visit him, though, he's in room 2510" she said in a sympathetic voice.

El almost dropped her phone to the floor. "Thank you so much, I surely will. Have a nice day", and with that she hung up. She then looked at the boy next to her, who was wearing a proud *I told you so* smile on his face.

"So, do you believe me now?" he asked

"Yeah. I'm sorry I thought you were lying. This is all so weird, though. I thought this kind of things only happened in movies, but I guess I was wrong" she said. "Okay, so let's recap all we know so far: nobody but me can see you, hear you or feel- wait, can I feel you?" El regretted her choice of words just as soon as they left her mouth. She embarrassedly looked down, a blush making its way up her neck straight to her face.

"Straightforward much, aren't you?" Mike chuckled with amusement. "I think there's only one way to find out". With that being said, he reached for the girl and pulled her close to his body, wrapping his arms around her in a tight embrace,

He didn't know exactly why he did that, given the fact that he had stopped showing any kind of physical affection years ago. He couldn't make out whether it was for the lack of antidepressants in his body, for the nightmare he was going through or for the gratitude he felt towards this kind girl (*or maybe some other reason he wasn't ready to even think about*), but holding her close to him had seemed like a brilliant idea, and now that he was doing it, he didn't want to let go. It felt comforting and just *right*.

Without wanting to admit it, El was enjoying the embrace just as much as him. Being inside his arms felt so nice, a sudden current of energy coursing through her body as his warmth surrounded her. *He's so warm and cozy even without being truly here*, she thought. She also quite liked the height difference between them, him being almost a whole foot taller than her.

However, when they both got out of their trance and realized what was actually going on, they let go of each other as if the other's skin was made of fire.

"I guess you're the exception to every rule" he said while awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. "That was a way to thank you, by the way, for not kicking me out instantly or even deciding you didn't want to help me"

"You don't have to thank me. This is the strangest thing that has ever happened to me, and if I were in your place I would like for someone to help me. I just don't understand why you can't touch anybody else" she thought out loud

"I want to find out what else I can't do, you know. Maybe I can walk through walls like every ghost to ever exist in movies".

Not waiting for an answer, Mike walked towards the closest wall he could see and tried to walk right through it. He immediately noticed that *no, he couldn't do that*, as he fell on his bum right after hitting his face and part of his torso.

El broke into laughter at the sight of the tall, lanky boy falling, his limbs seemingly everywhere at once. "Oh my god" she said once she could catch her breath, "are you okay?"

“Yeah, yeah, laugh at me all you want” he scoffed, groaning in pain as he got up. “Walking through walls is discarded, then. I remember having tried to press a button to call a nurse back at the hospital, but it didn’t work and I just thought it was broken. Now that I think about it, I might not be able to touch things”

“Well, why don’t you give it a try?” El suggested

Mike looked at his surroundings, examining the living room he was in. He noticed there weren’t many things he could grab, thinking to himself that El must prefer not to have too many decorative ornaments cramping her already small apartment. He soon found a small magazine lying on the floor, and he walked to it. He bent and tried to pick it up, but he saw his hands go straight through it. Not giving up, he tried again, but nevertheless failed.

“I guess touching objects is out of your list too” El teased.

“It’s not fair! I get all the disadvantages of not having a real, proper body but I can’t have any cool thing on my favor. The world really does hate me” he said, starting to feel overwhelmed again by everything that was going on.

“Hey, don’t bring yourself down, there’s no time for that. I know this must suck, but instead of sitting here moping around, why don’t you try and see if you can eat or drink something? I can bring food to your mouth in case you can’t pick it up yourself” El told him, immediately walking straight to the kitchen where she looked for a snack.

“This just keeps getting better and better! Now I have to be fed like a fucking baby” he muttered under his breath, following her figure with his eyes until she disappeared into the other room.

El looked everywhere, but found no food other than frozen waffles, leftover take-away pizza from last night and a couple of apples. *God, my fridge is really empty. Once this is all over I should pay the grocery store a visit*, she told herself.

“Is an apple okay? I kind of neglected grocery shopping and now I’m paying the price” she said, going back to the living room

“Yeah, it’s fine, let’s try”

El went near him and got the apple close to his mouth, trying to avoid thinking about the weirdness of the situation. Mike tried to take a bite, but the apple went through his mouth to the end of his chin. Eating was out of the table, too.

“I guess this answers our question, you’re the only person *or* thing who can touch me without going through me as if I was made of air” he said, looking at the girl in front of him who mirrored his disappointed expression.

“I’ve noticed that already”, she replied while frowning. “I just don’t get what’s going on and what this has to do with me”

“Me neither, but it seems like you’re stuck with me in this one, Hopper” Mike said, partially joking but also hoping that she didn’t decide she wanted him to go and find help elsewhere.

She saw his face change into a slightly panicked one and couldn’t help but try and make him feel better. “What a nice way to get to know you, right? I think this is my favorite way of making new friends so far” she told him, trying to lighten up the mood in the room, which earned her a smile from the boy standing in front of her.

El then remembered something: he hadn’t told her why he was in a coma in the first place, and even though she didn’t want to be nosy, she couldn’t help the words coming out of her. “So, do you know why you ended up in hospital? Was your body beaten up, missing any limbs or with any broken bones, or am I seeing the current version of Mike Wheeler?”

He tensed at her question. Should he tell her the truth or should he lie? He didn’t want her to think of him as a depressed, sick weirdo who had tried to take his own life and had been miserable since his early teens. Despite the sickeningly weird circumstances they had met, he felt like he wouldn’t be able to stand her judging eyes staring at him once she found out how he had ended up between being dead and alive. So when the words came out of him without his permission, it was no wonder what he was telling her

"I honestly have no idea; all I know is that something serious happened. I didn't notice any visible harm when I saw myself, so I think you're seeing the legit version of what my body looks like. Sorry to disappoint"

A grin formed on El's face as she spoke. "Thank god, I wouldn't like to see you all hurt when I go visit you" she told him, a breath of relief escaping her lips

"See me?" He said, surprised. "Are you going to visit me at hospital? Why would you do that, I'm one hundred percent asleep, anyway" he told her, trying to convince her not to go. What if by going she found out what had truly happened? What if by seeing him everything became more real and she got scared? What if his family was there and she talked to them? *What if, what if, what if, wha-*

"Oh, I know, but if I want to hear your voice I can just stay home. Just so you know, I will fully believe that you're not hurt only by seeing you with my own eyes. I work two blocks away from the hospital anyway, so it wouldn't take up a lot of my time" she shrugged.

Mike just couldn't believe how *kind* she was, and how she was willing to get more and more involved in this situation. He had got lost in his thoughts when suddenly, her voice interrupted him

"Hey, we kind of lost track of time and it's already nine in the evening" she said. "I was thinking you could stay here with me until all of this ends. I- I mean, I imagine that being in a hospital room without being able to talk to people must be awful" she finished, looking at him shyly but also with determination written all over her face

"Yeah, it sucks, but I wouldn't want to take advantage of your kindness. You've already done enough for me and I-"

"Hey" she cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "I really don't mind you being here. Being alone can get pretty boring and well, *lonely* after some time, so I could use a friend's company" El told him, smiling. "I saw that you can stand on the floor and you definitely can't go through walls, so maybe the only things your body

can't touch are the smaller ones, while you can actually feel larger objects and surfaces" she thought out loud

"It could be. Now that I think about it, I was sitting on a bench when you found me..."

An idea came to El's mind as he was speaking. "Would you like to sleep in the sofa? I don't think a pillow or some bedsheets would work with you given the circumstances, but it is comfortable as it is, and anything would be better than the floor" she offered

Mike was truly, deeply shocked by the sweet girl's words. "I just..." he began, but he was speechless.

Not knowing what to say, he walked the few steps that separated him from her and embraced her in their second hug of the day. He closed his eyes, feeling the tears start to come out of him, slowly at first but then in gut-wrenching sobs. He could feel El's hands rubbing comforting circles on his back, as he let his sorrow, fear and anger, but also thankfulness and hope pour out of him. Crying felt good, he decided, and he didn't mind doing it in front of her. They had only met hours ago, but he knew she wouldn't judge him.

"Thank you, El" he managed to say as they slowly broke their embrace when his sobs had ceased. "*Thank you so, so much*"

They both knew he wasn't talking only about the sofa.

Neither of them admitted it out loud.

Notes for the Chapter:

Reading your amazing feedback about last chapter inspired me and made me finish writing this chapter sooner than I had planned. I'd love to read what you think of the story so far!

I hope you had a nice weekend :)

3. With a little help from my friends

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello there! Y' all have been incredibly sweet and supportive in all the comments I've read, I'm just so happy! We're about to enter angst territory for one or two chapters, but don't worry, the mushiness will come back (and the angst will eventually come back too after that, oops)

Brace yourselves, friends, we're in for a bumpy ride

The following morning was a hard one for El. She had barely slept the night before, having stayed up all night replaying her conversation with Mike over and over again in her head. To make matters worse, she couldn't stop thinking about the curly-haired boy who was fast asleep on her sofa when she left for work. This whole situation seemed unreal, the way he was both with her and inside a hospital room and how she was the only person who could see him (his cuteness was also hard to believe sometimes, but she wouldn't admit that out loud). She had previously decided to visit him in hospital that day after work, which had her counting down the minutes for her shift to end. She had to admit that her thoughts were taking a toll on her job performance that morning: she couldn't remember which order was for which table and she kept bumping into things (*and maybe one or two customers*). Anyone who paid attention to her could see that her mind was all over the place, which led to Benny and some of her co-workers asking questions she didn't know how to answer. It's not like she could casually tell them she had a half dead person staying in her apartment.

After what seemed like years, her shift ended and she left the dinner after having apologized to Benny and promised him she would do better on her following shift. Luckily for her, it was Friday, which meant she had the whole weekend to relax and get accustomed to everything that was happening. It felt like her whole life had completely changed in the last twenty four hours and she couldn't catch up with all the new events.

The walk to the hospital was only five minutes long, but she couldn't

stop making up different possible scenarios in her head. What if she met his parents and they hated her? What if her whole family was there? What if he had a *girlfriend*? She hadn't considered that possibility before, and she couldn't understand why the mere thought of someone holding Mike the way she had the previous night made her feel almost sick. He was just a guy who needed her help and that's what she would do: help him and probably not see him again.

Right?

Before she could drown in her thoughts, she saw the hospital sign and got in. Trying to stop her mind from overthinking, she got in the elevator and pressed the second floor's button. After the elevator had taken her to her floor, she got out and could immediately see the typical hospital scene. All the walls were painted white, nurses and doctors were rushing and talking and rushing a bit more, families were sitting in those uncomfortable hospital chairs. She couldn't stop herself from remembering her days inside that same hospital, needles and tubes everywhere, people touching, moving and inspecting her, and feeling completely terrified and alone. The memories caused her to shiver, which woke her up from her horrifying trance and snapped her back to reality. *I have to do this quickly*, she thought, *I want to leave as soon as possible*.

Following the signs hanging from the walls, she made her way through the maze-like corridors. She could see the numbers on the rooms' doors getting closer and closer to the one she was looking for. 2506, 2507, 2508, 2509... *Bingo!* She started walking towards Mike's room, but before she could get there she bumped into someone.

"Oh my god, I'm so so sorry" she started apologizing "I don't know what's going on with me tod-"

Before she could finish her sentence, she heard a familiar voice call her name "El!? What are you doing here?" Not believing her ears, El looked down to see the person she had bumped into was no other than her best friend, Max

"Max, hey! I came to visit a friend who is hospitalized right there, in room 2510. His name is Mike, and he's-"

"In a coma, I know. I am here to see him, too. How do you two know each other?"

El froze in her place, not knowing what to respond. How had she forgotten to think about a believable story on how she had met Mike? She opened and closed her mouth a couple times, eyes growing wider with each second that passed, growing more nervous when she saw Max quirk an eyebrow. She was about to speak until-

"Babe? I thought you were leaving" said a guy who was standing behind Max. He was tall, well-built, dark-skinned and had deep, big brown eyes.

"I was" Max replied, "until I bumped into this clumsy girl right here who is also going to see Mike" she said teasingly. "Lucas, she's El. El, he's Lucas. I didn't have this in mind when I thought about how I wanted to introduce you two, but I guess destiny has its weird ways"

Oh, how right was she. El couldn't believe her luck. Max knew who Mike was, which meant Lucas knew Mike, too. What were the odds? She wanted to hide under a rock.

"Oh, so you're El?" the boy said, "I've heard a lot about you. As Max said, I'm Lucas, her boyfriend and one of Mike's best friends. I didn't know you were Mike's friend. It's so amazing how we're all seem to be connected, right?"

Yeah, fucking amazing.

"Um, yeah. Hi, Lucas, it's nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you too" El said

"Only good things, I hope" Lucas teased. "Here, let me introduce you to the rest of the boys."

El focused her attention on the boys who were sitting right next to Mike's room. She didn't see any girl there, which made her relax a bit. *Stop it, El, it's not important right now. Why do you care?* One of the boys had curly hair and blue eyes, and was playing a game in his phone to pass the time. He was concentrated on the game, but you could also see traces of sadness and worry for his friend written all

over his face. The other guy, on the other hand, was looking at the ceiling absentmindedly, and looked utterly devastated. He was considerably smaller than the other two, he had brown, straight hair and delicate features. However, what caught El's attention were his eyes. They were bloodshot and had dark circles under them, like he had been crying for days on end. She couldn't blame him.

"Guys" said Lucas, "this is El, Max's best friend and also apparently Mike's friend"

"Hey there" said the curly haired one, leaving his Candy Crush game forgotten. "I'm Dustin, and this one right here is Will" he finished, while pointing to his smaller friend, who just gave her a small smile and a wave.

"Hi guys, I was wondering if I could see Mike for a while. I just want to check on him" El told them

"Yeah, sure! His mother and sister are both inside the room, but I don't think they'll be leaving there anytime soon, so go ahead" Lucas said, while snaking an arm around Max's waist and pulling her close

El hesitated for a moment. She didn't have a story planned out on how she and Mike met, and she was definitely not ready to meet his family. All her instincts were telling her to turn around, get on an elevator and get the hell out of there, but one thing was stopping her. She couldn't help thinking about Mike's reaction when she said she would go see him, his smile, how he had hugged her tight and thanked her over and over, voice broken and tear-stained cheeks. She couldn't disappoint him like that, she was in this too deep to back down now. With a nod and a rushed "thanks", she walked to the room and opened the door.

The first thing she saw was a small couch where two women were sitting. One seemed to be in her late twenties, and El could see her beauty even behind the sadness on her face. She had blue eyes, a cute button nose and light brown hair. She didn't look like Mike at all, except for her sharp bone structure. *She must be Mike's sister*, El thought. The other woman was beautiful, too. She had curly hair and rosy lips, and was definitely older than the other girl. There was no doubt she was Mike's mother, El could tell, as she had the same big,

kind, brown eyes. Before she could continue analyzing them, she turned slightly to her right and suddenly she wasn't able to breathe normally. *Mike*. She could feel her heart breaking inside her chest at the sight of the boy tucked inside the hospital bed, looking pale and worn out. She had to use all her inner strength in order not to break down crying right then and there.

The two women turned their heads from Mike to her, and the older one spoke.

"Hi, sweetie, what brings you here?"

"Hi, I didn't mean to intrude, I'm here to see Mike" El said, feeling like a nervous wreck of emotions

"Oh, don't worry, you're not intruding. Hi, I'm Karen, Mike's mother, and she's Nancy, Mike's sister"

"We haven't seen you around before", said Nancy. "What's your name?"

"I'm Eleanor, El for short. I met Mike just some months ago. I work at Benny's dinner, and he was a regular customer, so we usually talked when he came and we became friends" said El, trying to sound as convincing as possible with her recently thought lie

"Oh, that doesn't sound like Mike at all" replied Karen with a confused look on her face. "He is usually more..."

"Antisocial" said Nancy with a snort

"Reserved" corrected Karen while rolling her eyes at her daughter. "I guess that's where he went on his daily walks. I'm sure he couldn't resist talking to such a beautiful girl. It's a shame Ted, Mike's father, and Holy, his younger sister, went home to have a shower. They would have loved to meet you"

El blushed and smiled politely. "Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler." She turned her gaze to Mike, "How is he doing?"

"He's as good as one could be in this situation. The doctors said the first 24 hours were critical, and the first hours were terrible for him"

said Karen, eyes filling with tears “but he slowly became more stable, and now he’s doing quite fine”

El wondered if him being better had to do with her helping him, but she quickly dismissed her thoughts. She hadn’t done anything else than talk to him, she wasn’t some miraculous remedy. Without thinking, she approached Mike’s bed to have a closer look at him. Seeing him there, unconscious and helpless broke her, and she couldn’t contain the tears that began flowing down her face. She moved some hair that had stuck to his forehead, feeling his cold but soft skin under her fingertips. Despite having met him only a day ago, she couldn’t help but feel drawn to him in some special way, as if they had met in other life and they were supposed to meet in every single universe existing.

Wiping her tears away, she spoke to him. “Hi there, I came, just like I said I would. You look so different here, so pale and cold and *lifeless*. Just hold on, alright? We’re gonna figure this one out. You’ll be okay. Please, hold on.” She ran her fingers through his hair once more, and then turned around to find the two Wheeler women staring at her, crying. She felt like she was an intruder in a private moment, so she tried to apologize. “I’m sorry, I think I’ll just-“ she was cut midsentence by a pair of arms wrapping tight around her shoulders. *Holy shit, Mike’s mother is hugging me*, El thought, but hugged back just as tightly. She felt another pair of arms join the hug, and she knew it was Nancy. The three women stayed there holding and comforting each other for a minute, before Nancy spoke

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for, it’s nice to know that my brother has friends who care as deeply for him as I can tell you do. I hope you visit him again soon, so I can introduce you to my dad, my sister and my boyfriends”

El’s body filled with happiness and just a little bit of confusion. *Boyfriends?* She smiled kindly before replying “That would be great, thanks. I’ll come back here as soon as I can”

The three said their goodbyes, and El went out the room, happier and more relaxed than she had been when she first went in. Right upon opening the door, she was greeted by Max and Mike’s friends talking about whatever topic came to their minds. When Max saw her, she

could notice El's tear-tracked face and she immediately got up to give her a hug

"Are you okay, El? Was everything okay in there?"

"Yeah, his family is adorable. It's just... hard, you know? Seeing him like that"

Max rubbed El's back while giving her arm a comforting squeeze, "I know, it's hard for all of us. We'll all get through this, though. I was about to leave when you came, do you want to go together? We could walk back to your apartment and I can call an Uber and tell the driver to pick me up from there"

"That sounds great, I need to get out of here" said El.

After Max had called her ride, they each said their goodbyes, Max giving Lucas a short kiss on the lips. Heading out of the hospital, Max asked again about how El had met Mike, and she gave her the same explanation she had given the Wheelers some minutes ago. Not wanting Max to know she was lying, El quickly tried to avoid the topic

"So", she said "how are you and Lucas?"

"We're fine, he's amazing" Max replied, sighing dreamily. "I had never thought about having a serious relationship before, but with him everything comes so naturally, he's just the best boyfriend I could have ever asked for". She stopped talking and slapped her forehead. "Oh god, he's turned me into such a cheeseball, I don't even recognize myself anymore"

El laughed and nudged her best friend's shoulder with her own "Hey, don't be so hard on yourself. It's okay to be all mushy and romantic sometimes"

Max seemed to be in deep thought for some seconds, then frowned. "Yeah, I guess it is. I just want to be with him during this hard time, you know? He really loves Mike and he's devastated. He's afraid that he won't wake up, and angry that he hurt himself the way he did"

El's face twisted in confusion, but before she could ask what she was

talking about, they reached her apartment. Max's Uber was already waiting for her in front of the building, so she hurriedly said her goodbyes to El with a hug and a promise to hang out soon. El stood in front of the building's door, unable to stop thinking about what her friend had said. Hurt himself? Mike said he had no idea what had happened to him, but maybe... Maybe he was lying. Starting to feel the cold autumn weather on her skin, she decided to enter her home. *I have to figure this out*, she thought on the elevator, *I have to ask him*.

She couldn't stand being lied to, and she sure as hell wouldn't go easy on him if he hadn't been honest.

Notes for the Chapter:

I really hope you liked this chapter, it is definitely my favorite so far, and the most fun to write! Let me know what you think of the new character additions ;)

4. I said hey, what's going on?

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey guys! I don't like making El and Mike fight, but I promise the following chapters will have tons of mileven fluff. Thanks for your incredible support :)

When El entered her apartment, everything was oddly quiet and Mike wasn't in the living room. She had expected to hear some noises, see him or at least not feel like the apartment was empty. She went into the kitchen to see if Mike was there, but he wasn't anywhere to be seen. *What if he left? Maybe he thought I wasn't good company and he decided to find another way to solve his problem.* All the anger she had felt minutes ago turned into sadness and worry, but she couldn't understand why. They had only met a day ago, and if he wanted to leave, it was better for her. One less thing to care about. Just as she was wondering why this mysterious boy had her so worried, she heard a voice

"Hey there" said Mike. "I'm glad you came back. You took your time, huh? Being here alone is not fun and I had to entertain myself, so I hope you don't mind that I was checking out your bedroom"

She turned around to see him, and the anger suddenly came back to every molecule of her body. It must have been pretty noticeable, as Mike's face contorted with confusion and the littlest bit of fear

"Please don't be mad, if I had known your bedroom was forbidden territory I wouldn't have got in. I wasn't trying to annoy you or disrupt your privacy, I should have known better than to—"

"Stop, Mike, I'm not mad about that" she said, cutting his rambling

"Then why do you look like you want to strangle me?"

El took a deep breath and tried to calm herself down. Maybe he had a good explanation. Maybe what Max had said wasn't that important. She tried to choose her next words as carefully as she could. "I went to see you at hospital and I met your friends and family"

“Oh god, did my dad say something inappropriate? He can be a real ass if he wants to, I’m so sorry, please don’t be mad” Mike said, instantly wanting to hit his father for being rude

“It’s not about your dad, he wasn’t even there” seeing Mike’s face turn to a disappointed one, she quickly added, “He had taken your little sister to your house so that they both could have a shower. Who I did saw, though, were your friends. Turns out that one of them is dating my best friend”

Mike was confused for a second. Almost none of them had girlfriends, being way too nerdy and awkward to flirt or even have a proper conversation with a pretty girl. Will was definitely single and, for all he knew Dustin was single too, so that left... “Your best friend is Max Mayfield?” he asked incredulously

“Yeah, she is. I guess it really is a small world after all. When I was coming back home, Max offered to keep me company and walk here together, and while we were walking she said something that caught my attention”

He gulped with fear “What did she say?”

“She told me, and I quote, that Lucas was angry at you for hurting yourself enough to end up like you are now. What did she mean, Mike? For all you told me, you didn’t know what had happened to you” El said, every word intensifying her anger

Mike became paralyzed. *Fuck, he was in trouble.* He had considered the possibility of her finding out that what he said was a lie, but he hadn’t really thought about it. What should he say now? Should he go on lying or should he tell her the truth? He could feel El was a good person who wouldn’t judge him if he told her what he had done, but the fear of being perceived as a freak outweighed every good attitude El had with him.

“El’ I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you, I just-“

“Tell me what, Mike? What did you do?” said an exasperated El

“I... I kept on smoking cigarettes even though I knew my lungs were

pretty fucked up. I think that caused me to stop breathing in my sleep, which damaged my brain and now, well, here we are” he said, trying to sound as convincing as possible. It wasn’t a complete lie, though. He sometimes had a smoke when life became too much, but not as many to end up in hospital, that was for sure. However, he’d rather sound like a cigar addict than a suicidal person

El didn’t respond for a minute. She could sense his nervousness, but she didn’t think much of it. Instead, she was focused on the fact that he had lied to her. She had helped him, opened her home to him and he kept on hiding the truth. With her eyes filling with tears for what felt like the hundredth time since she had met Mike, she spoke

“Why did you lie to me? I did everything I could to help you, I tried to make you feel better and that’s what I get in return? One of the golden rules in my life is that friends don’t lie, and if someone breaks it, I just...” she said, voice cracking. “I thought you trusted me Mike. You hurt me”

Mike couldn’t stop his heart from breaking at the sight of the crying girl in front of him. She was hurt and it was his fault. And yet, he had kept on lying, telling her bullshit about how he had ended up in a coma. *I am an idiot*, he thought, *I should have told her the truth since the beginning*. Suddenly, all his hurt turned to anger. Why should he tell her the truth when he had just met her? He didn’t owe her anything; he hadn’t forced her to help him. All that “friends don’t lie” crap angered him, too. They weren’t friends now and they definitely weren’t friends right when they met

“I hurt you? I fucking hurt you?” he said, raising his voice. “Look at you, playing the victim when it’s me who is trapped in this shitstorm. What is wrong with you?” he shouted, coming closer to an already sobbing El. “And that friends don’t lie shitty phrase doesn’t apply in this situation. I’m not your friend, nor have I ever been. So get that into that little head of yours, okay? We’re *not* friends!”

Right upon finishing his angry outburst, he instantly regretted it. What was he thinking? This girl had only been the kindest person he had ever met and he decided to scream to her and push her away. He didn’t have time to fix his mistake, though, because the next thing he saw was El taking her purse and walking to the door

“El, wait, I-“

“Save it. I don’t want to hear you right now. I’m leaving, don’t come after me, I want to be alone. Goodbye, Mike” and with that, she closed the door and left. What she didn’t know is that the boy inside her apartment had started crying and cursing himself, not fully believing what he had done. He kicked the nearest wall, not noticing the growing pain in his foot. All he could think about was the broken girl who had left minutes ago. He didn’t know why seeing her cry felt like a dagger straight to his heart, and knowing that he had caused the tears was like burying it deeper and deeper. He didn’t care, though, because right now all that mattered to him was holding her close like he had the previous night, wiping her tears and apologizing.

El, on the other hand, wanted nothing more than to be away from Mike. It was weird, because ever since they had met all she wanted to do was spend time with him. She felt like a strong connection had formed since the first second they have locked eyes, and she thought he had felt it too. Now, it was pretty obvious that Mike wanted nothing to do with her, his words making his point clearer than water. His angry voice stating that they weren’t friends wouldn’t leave her alone, the image of him screaming replaying over and over in her head like a broken record. *What a way to spend my Friday night, she told herself, alone in the middle of the street crying over someone who doesn’t care about me.*

She knew that they had only met a day or so ago, but she couldn’t erase the memory of how good his arms had felt around her, how private that moment had felt. She would never forget how he broke down crying in front of her and how he had let her rub comforting circles on his back while his world was seemingly falling apart. It made her feel special, knowing that he had opened up to her that way. All she felt now was stupid, realizing that he most probably couldn’t contain his feelings anymore and had accepted her help only because she was the only option, not because she was the best one. She kept wandering the streets absentmindedly for some time, until she arrived to a park. It wasn’t the prettiest one she had been to, but it was something. She couldn’t be picky in times like this. The best thing about it was that it was completely empty, which gave her the

opportunity to be alone with her spinning mind.

The park was small and didn't have a big playground, but something caught her eye almost immediately. *Swings*. They had always been her favorite, not having had lots of chances to play as a kid, but seizing every moment she had and spending almost all of them on a swing. They made her feel free, like she could fly, and freedom was what lacked the most during her childhood years.

She walked straight to them and sat in one, instantly swinging her body back and forth. The cold autumn night's wind on her face would have made her cold any other day, but not right now. Tonight, it made her feel refreshed and helped her clear her mind. After what had seemed like years, she decided to get down the swing and lie on the grass. Looking at the night sky made her thoughts drift back to Mike. The sky was as black as his eyes and curly locks, and the stars were the perfect representation of his freckles. *Why does he have to be so cute? I'm mad at him; I don't want to be thinking about how lovely his face is!*

Realizing that it was probably later than what she had imagined, El checked her phone, only to see it was already 12:30 at night. *Crap*, she thought, *I should go back home. It's not safe to wander around town this late at night*. The only problem with coming back was that Mike was there. She hated arguing with people, but this particular argument had broken her to pieces, and she didn't know what would happen next. Having had some time to think, she had realized that maybe there was a good reason he had lied to her. After all, he didn't know who she was or if she was trustworthy. She regretted having been angry at him without letting him explain himself, and leaving without giving him a chance to apologize. *He is going through what must be the hardest time in his life, it's normal for him to overreact*. With that last thought on her mind and determination to make things right again, she got up and started walking back home.

While El had her time to think things through at the park, Mike also had some time to cool down back at the apartment. He practiced an apology over and over again, but none of them seemed to be completely right. He had screwed things up big time, and a simple "I'm sorry" wasn't enough. He didn't understand what had gotten into him and why he had told her all those hurtful things. To make

matters worse, he had lied again about his suicide attempt. He also said they weren't friends, and while that wasn't entirely false, he knew he wanted to get to know her and eventually form a friendship. *Maybe more*, a voice spoke in his head, but he quickly dismissed it. How would they ever be more than friends after everything he had said? He was sure she didn't even want to see him anymore.

That thought made him panic. What if she made him leave the apartment? She might not want to keep on helping him anymore. He ran his hands through his hair in a desperate attempt to calm down, but it didn't work. Not only had he risked the opportunity to be in the life of an incredible girl, but he also had possibly lost the only help he could get. How was he going to go through this alone? What was he supposed to do? *You're so stupid, Mike. You always ruin everything good that happens to you, no wonder why you wanted to kill yourself in the first place.* Before he could keep beating himself up for what he had done, he heard a sound. Not any sound, though, but the door unlocking.

She's back.

Before he had time to consider what he was doing and as if his legs had a mind of his own, he stood up from the couch where he was sitting and walked right to the door. Just as he was standing as close to it as possible, the door opened and he immediately saw a pair of brown eyes staring up at him with a mixture of emotions that almost knocked the wind out of him.

"Hi"

Notes for the Chapter:

why the fuck you lying, why you always lying,
ummmm oh my god stop fucking lying - me @ Mike
rn

5. We scream and we shout, but make up the same day

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello lovely people! This chapter contains mentions of abuse and domestic violence, nothing too explicit but I wanted to warn you in case you are triggered by it. It's also kinda angsty?? maybe?? But completely filled with mileven.

Writing this story has been a pleasure thanks to all of your amazing comments and support, and I hope you like reading this as much as I like writing it!

The first thing El saw when she opened the door was a tall, lanky figure staring down at her. When she looked up, she met Mike's gaze, which was filled with emotions that mirrored her own. Sadness and fear were almost tangible inside the apartment, but most importantly, she could see regret written all over his face. She barely got to greet him when she felt his arms wrapping around her small frame and pulling her impossibly close to his chest. She didn't pull back (*and she didn't want to, either*), wrapping her own arms around his torso. They stood there, embraced in each other's arms for minutes before any of them was able to think clearly again and say something. It felt like every time they hugged, the whole world became blurry and the only important thing existing in that moment was them. El couldn't help but wonder how they had developed such a connection in the span of twenty-four(*ish*) hours, but then she remembered him saying they weren't friends and her heart deflated. But if they weren't friends, why was he holding her that way? Her rambling thoughts were cut abruptly when she heard Mike's voice

"I'm so sorry El, I don't know what got into me and why I acted the way I did before you left" he whispered, her still in his arms. "Everything I said was bullshit, and I could never think of you that way. You're here, helping me through all this nonsense and wanting nothing in return, and all I could do was hurt you"

El squeezed him in her arms, having become speechless but not wanting him to think that his apology wasn't being accepted.

"We are friends, you know? At- at least I think we are, if you want to take me back after what happened. Even though we only met yesterday, it almost feels like it was meant to happen, like I've known you for years and years." Mike continued, grateful that he couldn't see his blushing face. "You're just so kind and genuine and I'm *so sorry* for acting the way I did and hurting you, I'm a wasteoid and a fucking idiot and you deserve so much more. I completely understand if you want me out of your apartment but please just let me-"

"Mike" El said, ending his rambling, "I understand"

Mike put some distance between them in order to look her in the eye, reluctantly letting her go but still holding her close by her shoulders. That was it? How was she so comprehensive? She was definitely too good to be true. His heart fluttered at her words and her closeness, their previous embrace having brought a feeling to his chest he hadn't felt in a while. Despite the horrible situation he was stuck in and being closer to death than ever before, he had never felt more alive.

"Why are you so good to me?" he said, his voice thick with emotion, "I lied and screamed at you, and you forgive me just like that? You're just so amazing, I can't believe this" It was El's turn to blush now, his closeness and compliments almost leaving her breathless.

"I know that you're going through hell right now, and it's normal for you to act the way you did. I just wish you hadn't lied to me, that's all, but now I get why you did it. I'm not mad anymore, Mike, I just want you to be okay. I want *us* to be okay, and I want to help you"

Hearing her words made Mike's heart race, but also shrink with guilt. She was definitely one of the best people he had ever met, and yet he kept lying to her. However, he decided against telling her the truth in that moment. *We're just making up right now, I don't want to ruin it by telling her I lied again*, he thought. *I'll tell her when the moment's right*. He let go of her arms and scratched the back of his head anxiously

"So you don't want me to go?"

"Of course not, you dweeb" El told him, trying to calm his sudden fear. "Like I said, I want to help you, but you have to let me. I

promise I won't get mad at you without letting you speak first, but you also have to accept your part of the deal. Do you promise you won't push me away anymore?"

"Promise" Mike said, feeling glad she hadn't made him promise that he wouldn't lie again. He couldn't have lied straight to her face, not when she was looking at him with such a hopeful look in her eyes that almost swept him off his feet.

"Cool" said El, a smile creeping its way on her face for the first time in what felt like years

"Cool" he told her back, the sight of her smile making him mirror it

They stood there without speaking, just gazing at each other for a minute. Neither of them could believe that the fight was over and in the past. The heavy feeling they had both felt in their chests some hours ago was long forgotten and was instead replaced by *something else*. Something that grew and grew every second they spent together but that neither of them could yet identify (or would dare to think about). Before the silence could get awkward, El made her way on to the couch and invited Mike to do the same. Once they were sitting, legs crossed and facing each other, she spoke

"What you said about your father being an asshole hasn't left my mind, you know? I couldn't meet him, but both your mom and your sister were so lovely that it's hard to think of anyone rude in your family". *And you're awesome, too*, she thought, too shy to admit it out loud.

"Yeah, he's kind of a douche. My mother's great, and I guess Nancy and Holly are okay, but my dad..." he began. He didn't know what was causing him to open up that way to her, but he didn't want to stop telling her about his personal stuff. Talking and crying felt way better than bottling up his feelings, and it made some of the ever-growing cloud of sadness that had surrounded him for years start to go away. "He just never cared. He lived with us, yes, but that doesn't mean he wasn't an absent father. He didn't talk to me or bother to get to know me at all, and he criticized the little things he did know"

"What did he say to you?" El asked, heart aching for the image of

little Mike growing up with a parent like that

“Oh, he wanted to have manlier son, that’s for sure. I was never popular as I grew up, I was considered a nerd. That made girls stay away from me, which made my dad think I was gay, and he didn’t like it. He knew that boys at school called me and my friends *fags* and *fairies* and all kind of homophobic slurs, and instead of helping me, he said they had a reason to do so. He always told me to ‘suck it up and man up’. So yeah, I’d say he’s a douche” Mike said, sighing in defeat

“I can’t believe a person like him could raise someone like you” El replied, sorry and sad and *angry* that Mike had to go through that

“I guess my mom is to blame for the way I am now. She basically raised me alone, trying to make it up to me for my father’s hurtful words with her love and sweetness. I don’t get what she saw in him or why she hasn’t gotten a divorce yet, though. I don’t think they didn’t love each other before, but the thing is that my dad doesn’t know *how* to love. He loved me, I’m sure about that, but he was just the worst. He’s rude to everybody, though, including the rest of my family and friends. You wouldn’t believe the things that he said when he found out my friend Will’s gay” he said, chuckling humorlessly. “That’s why I was worried that he had said something to you. I don’t want him to hurt you or make you uncomfortable in any way”

“Thanks for telling me this, it means a lot to me” El said while squeezing Mike’s arm reassuringly.

In that honest and vulnerable moment, she felt like she could also open up to him. For all that she knew, even though Mike’s family story was sad, her life had been a horror film. However, she knew he would listen without judging, and before she could overthink it, she started speaking.

“I didn’t have a good father, either. My biological parents died in a car accident when I was only a baby, and I was put into foster care because nobody in my family could take care of me. When I was eight or so, a couple adopted me. The woman was named Terry Ives and the man was called Martin Brenner, and they promised to give me a home and a family. I thought I had found my happily ever after,

but I soon realized I was wrong” El said, taking a pause and closing her eyes to contain the tears that were beginning to form. As she was gathering up the courage to continue talking, she could feel Mike’s hand intertwining with hers and rubbing comforting patterns with his thumb. Ignoring the tingling in her hand that his actions had brought, she continued, squeezing his hand just a little bit

“We moved to a little town near here, far away from my foster care home. As soon as I had settled down, Brenner’s beatings started”

“*Beatings?*” asked a surprised Mike. Suddenly all he could see was red as anger took over his body. He would never allow anyone to lay hands on her again, *ever*.

“Yeah. He would hit Terry until she couldn’t stand up and then he would come for me. I had to stop going to school only months after I had started, the bruises being impossible to cover. He just wanted to make sure no one knew what he did, threatening me to kill both Terry and I if I ever told anyone what was going on. Years went on and I didn’t have an education, I didn’t have friends, life was just plain horrible. Everything remained the same, until one day, when I was sixteen, he came home at three in the morning, drunk as hell. He started yelling and throwing things everywhere and—“ she had to stop, unable to contain her tears anymore. *Was it too much to tell him this? Why was she doing it?* However, her doubts were cleared out when she saw Mike wiping tears of his own and waiting for her to continue. “And he brought a gun. I don’t know where he got it from, but as soon as I saw what was about to happen, I called 911. I- it was too late, though. He shot Terry to death, and tried to shoot me in my chest, but he got my arm instead. He didn’t have time to try again because the police arrived, if not I would-”

“Don’t” said a crying Mike, squeezing El’s hand until his knuckles became white. Neither of them seemed to care. “Don’t ever say that. You’re *here* and you’re *fine*”

“Luckily I am, and that’s when Hopper came into the picture. They had to send police officers from nearby cities to help, and one of them was him. He insisted on bringing me here to treat my arm, so I stayed in the same hospital where you are now. We connected instantly, and I didn’t have a legal guardian, so he made me stay with

him while the court sorted everything out. I was afraid of being touched by anybody, but his warm hugs were the only thing that made me feel better. He decided to adopt me and he helped me with everything, really. He homeschooled me until I had the same level than kids my age had, and he found a great therapist who helped me overcome trauma.”

Mike couldn't imagine the Chief being all soft and fatherly, but he was glad El could have that after the hell she had been put through. He had heard the rumors when El first moved in, but he thought they were just that- stupid small town gossip. Without thinking, he let go of her hand and instead cupped her face in his hands, gently brushing his thumbs over her cheekbones to clean the tears out of her face. He felt El shiver underneath his touch, and he slowly let go, cleaning his own tear-tracked face before speaking

“You're so brave, El, so *brave*. You won't have to go through that much pain again, I will make sure of that, I promise. If we can sort this out, you'll never have to worry about any of that. I'll help you as you're helping me now. We can hang out and try to get back all the time you lost, we can do anything you'd like, and I'll introduce you to my friends so you can be part of the party, too”

El smiled at his kind words and his eagerness, her heart swelling with hope and appreciation. “That would be amazing, thank you so much. I only spoke a few words with your friends, but they seem to be really cool guys. Besides, with Max being Lucas' girlfriend, I think I'll be hearing a lot from them in the future”

Mike gave her a genuine smile, while impulsively brushing back a few strands of hair that had fallen on her face. He was never one to have lots of physical contact, but he couldn't seem to put distance between El and him. Having her close felt warm and comforting, and he didn't want the feeling to end. He knew El also liked his closeness, or at least didn't seem to mind it, as her skin became warmer and her sad expression turned into a brighter one with his actions. They were both entranced, completely lost in the moment, until El yawned. The past few days had been exhausting for her and Mike, and it was getting pretty late.

“Hey, you're tired. I could really use some sleep, too. Why don't we

call it a day and go to bed?” Mike suggested

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. Thank god tomorrow, *or shall I say today*, is Saturday. I need at least one hundred hours of sleep” El joked, trying to lighten up the mood the previous conversation had brought

“Me too. The sofa is quite good, by the way. Thanks again for letting me crash here, and sorry for what happened earlier”

“No problem. Tomorrow we can start researching about your situation, to see if we can find something helpful” El said with a smile, standing up from the sofa and walking to her bedroom, only turning around upon hearing Mike’s voice

“Night, El” he said, smiling warmly at her from the sofa

“Night, Mike”

Notes for the Chapter:

Aw I love when my children are supportive and loving towards each other. Hope you enjoyed Mike and El making up (and some canon parallels)

6. I just want to know you better now

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey lovelies! Your support has been amazing and I wanted to give back to you and update yesterday, but my laptop is shitty and didn't want to turn on. Anyway, hope you like this chapter!

(I had a nightmare last night where I updated this new chapter and everyone was commenting how bad it was) ((I woke up almost in tears lol))

When El woke up the following morning, she felt more refreshed than she had in a while. Having made up with Mike made her feel ten times lighter than she had been feeling since she left the hospital. She was no longer looking for an explanation, having her mind completely focused on helping the tall boy who was sleeping in her sofa. She got up from her bed and looked in the mirror. Her curly hair was sticking up everywhere and she could clearly see she had drooled at some point during the night. Her cheeks flushed thinking about Mike seeing her in that state and she decided to take a shower before going to check up on him.

The sound of water falling was what woke Mike up. At first he thought it was raining, but then he could make up that the sound came from no other place than the apartment shower. He couldn't help but think that El's naked body was surrounded by steam, tiny droplets falling on her body and making their way to the floor.

Only two rooms next to him.

He gulped. He had never had sex before and was never really interested in it, but the thought of that beautiful girl in that situation left him all hot and bothered, making him need cold shower of his own (maybe not *on his own*, though). Shaking the thought out of his head, he tried to calm down and go back to sleep. He was about to fall asleep again, when he heard a voice

"Morning, sleepyhead" El greeted him. The only visible trace of a

shower was her wet hair, some sticking to her left cheek. She was wearing an oversized blue sweater and a pair of leggings, and Mike decided right then and there that blue might be his favorite color from then on. She looked beautiful in the most simple of ways. After staring at her like an idiot for some time, he realized he had to say something back

"Hey you. Slept well?" he said, his voice raspy and an octave lower from sleep. El almost fainted. *Holy fuck, his sleeping voice is hot.*

"Yeah, thanks. I was thinking that we can search online about your situation, see if something pops up" she said, sounding hopeful

Mike, however, was skeptical. It's not like one could google 'hey I'm half dead what do i do' and a logical answer would appear. "I don't know about that, El. I mean, I don't think we'll find anything useful"

He regretted his words when he saw that the hopeful look El was wearing suddenly changed to a dissappointed one. She was only trying to help as best as she could, but he kept bringing her down. So even though he still didn't believe google would help, he decided that giving it a try wouldn't hurt

"You know what? Let's do it. Maybe we can find something" he said, trying to sound convinced

"No, no. We don't have to. It was a stupid idea anyway and-"

"Don't say that" Mike cut her off. He had made her believe her idea was stupid, great. "We won't know unless we try, right?"

El smiled, her face lighting up. "Yeah, right. Can I...?" she said, gesturing to the sofa

Mike realized that, even though he had sat up as soon as El woke him up, he was still taking up most part of the sofa. Completely embarrassed and with a blush forming in his face, he scooted over and let El sit.

They spent the following few hours searching phrases as ridiculous as "alive coma, help" and, as Mike had thought, nothing came up. They entered almost every website, not even avoiding the crazy,

conspirative ones. Growing tired, frustrated and hungry, El got up from the couch and popped a frozen pizza in the oven. Once it was done, El brought it to the living room

“I would offer you to share this if you could eat, but if it makes you feel any better, this pizza is awful” she joked

“Don’t worry. I don’t like pizza, so it isn’t a big temptation for me. I do miss food, though”

“*You don’t like pizza?! What kind of monster are you?*” El asked, not believing that someone could dislike something as glorious as pizza

“I guess there are a lot of things we don’t know about each other, huh?” Mike teasingly said

What was supposed to be a joke, though, let them both thinking. They seemed to have skipped the stage of getting to know the little things about one another, going straight to telling the other about personal things. That thought brought an idea to El’s mind

“You’re right. Why don’t we play 20 questions and solve that? I don’t think I can keep looking through hundreds of shitty websites”

“What are we? Twelve?” Mike joked, secretly content with her plan. He wanted to know her, all of her, and that game was a good way to start

“No, but we are bored and tired and I don’t think we will find a better way to spend our Saturday. It’s not like we can go out” El said

“You’re right. Can I start?”

“Go ahead” El told him

The questions drifted from one topic to another, going through the basic ones such as favorite colors or animals, to more personal ones like best friends and what they liked doing. They found out they had some things in common, like loving dogs more than anything else in the world and preferring to watch movies at home instead of going out and partying. In the middle of the game, El took the chance to ask about something that hadn’t left her mind since she went to visit

him at hospital

“So...” she began. “Do you have a girlfriend?” She immediately wanted to slap herself for her straightforwardness, not having found a subtler way to ask him if he was single

Mike laughed at her embarrassed face before answering “No, I don’t. I never had one, and I think I never wil. I don’t believe in the g word”

“Oh” said El, trying to hide the happiness his answer had brought (*why was she happy?*) “The g word, huh? Why don’t you believe in relationships?”

“I guess I never found anybody that could make me feel in love or some crap like that. I never wanted to settle down with someone, and I was never one to picture myself married happily ever after” *Until I met you*, a little voice spoke in Mike’s head, but he quickly dismissed it. What was he even thinking? “Do you? Have a boyfriend, I mean. Or a girlfriend, that would be fine too, I don’t want you to think that I-“

“Stop rambling, Mike” El said while laughing. “No, I’m single. I never had a partner, either, but it wasn’t because I didn’t want to. It’s more like I never had the chance to meet somebody who I wanted to be with” *Somebody like you*, she found herself wanting to say. What was wrong with her?

They fell into an awkward silence, both too confused by their own feelings to even have the ability to keep on asking things. However, Mike didn’t want to leave things that way, so he asked the first thing that came to his mind

“What’s your favorite movie?”

El snapped out of her trance upon hearing his words. She didn’t want to come across as nerdy, but she didn’t see the point in lying. “Don’t laugh at me, but I really, really like Star Wars”

Mike felt himself open his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but no words came out. A beautiful, kind girl who also loved Star Wars? *She is fucking perfect.*

“I also love Star Wars! What is your favorite one?”

And so they spent almost an hour talking excitedly about their favorite Star Wars movie, discussing their favorite and less favorite characters and debating about the new films that were coming. Knowing that they could be nerdy with each other, they talked on and on without feeling like they were boring the other. Suddenly, an idea came to El’s mind

“Hey, I actually have episode IV downloaded, do you wanna watch it?”

“Are you kidding me?” said an excited Mike “of course I want to!”

With that being said, El went to find her computer and plugged it to her tv. Once everything was connected, she pressed play and went back to the sofa, where Mike was waiting for her. Entranced by the movie, they both started to lean closer and closer to the other, like a gravitational pull was making them do so. Before they realized what was going on, their legs and arms were brushing. El could see Mike blush, and she was sure she was blushing, too. In spite of her shyness, something came to her and she decided to lean her head on Mike’s shoulder.

Mike drew in a sharp breath, feeling his rapid heartbeat against his chest. What should he do? He enjoyed her being close and he didn’t want to ruin it. Feeling a sudden wave of braveness, he moved his arm where El was lying her head on and wrapped it across the girl’s waist, pulling her close. He was beginning to regret his decision when she felt her stiffen against him, but he then could feel her relax against him and lay her face on his chest. Mike felt like flying.

El couldn’t believe what was happening. If someone had told her some days ago that she would be cuddling with a guy on her couch (and a handsome one, may she add), she wouldn’t have believed them. However, there was no place she’d rather be than in his arms. She felt Mike tighten his grip on her, and she burried deeper into his chest. She could stay like that *forever*.

However, that wasn’t possible. Once the movie had ended, neither of them wanted to move but they knew they had to. They were both

waiting for the other to speak or move or do something, but that wait was interrupted by El's stomach grumbling

Mike laughed and checked what time it was. Without having noticed the time passing, it was already nine at night, no wonder why El was hungry. Not changing his position and still having her in his arms, he looked down to meet her eyes

"Hey, it's pretty late. Do you want to have something for dinner?" he asked her

"Yeah, I don't have anything, though. I think I'll order chinese or something" El decided, reluctantly letting go of Mike and standing up to grab her cellphone and order something at her favorite chinese restaurant. Once she had hung up, she heard Mike speak

"Do you know how to cook? I've never seen you cook something"

"Yeah, I do" El said while laughing "The problem is that my fridge is completely empty. I think tomorrow I'll go to the supermarket and get some things. I like to think that I'm a pretty awesome cook"

"I guess I'll have to judge that if I leave hospital sometime"

"*When*" El said, determination palpable on her voice

"Sorry?"

"You'll try my food *when* you leave, not *if* you leave"

Mike didn't know how to answer. He didn't want to get her hopes up, he knew he may not make it. Did he even want to live? These days with El had been great and had distracted him from what was happening, but there was an undeniable reality: he had tried to kill himself, and he wasn't sure if failing had been a blessing or a punishment. Trying not to drown in his thoughts and not to hurt the girl standing in front of him, he changed the subject

"So you're saying you want to keep on seeing me?"

"Of course I do. You're great, Mike, and I don't think I can forget about you that easily" El said. She instantly regretted not thinking

before speaking. “Only if you want, though. I won’t make y-“

“I want to. I really want to. You’re not getting rid of me, Hopper. I’m not ready to let you go yet” he said, confidence in every word he spoke. He didn’t know how he managed to be so upfront, but he didn’t regret it, not when he heard her response

“Me neither, Mike. Me neither”

Notes for the Chapter:

I feel like this chapter is terrible, but I wanted to post something for you guys. I apologize if you didn’t like it. Anyway, here’s some good ol’ cuddling for you :)

7. I'll hold you when things go wrong (I'll be with you from dusk 'till dawn)

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello wonderful people! I know last chapter wasn't the best, so I decided to make it up to you with an extra long, extra fluffy chapter. I tried to update quicker than usual because your comments were just amazing and you deserve that little extra love. Enjoy!

Time went by fast and before El and Mike could tell, two weeks had passed since they started their weird friendship. They kept on looking for ways to make Mike come to life again, even going to a “witch” who told them she could help, but who ended up being a total scammer. Nothing seemed to work, but neither of them lost hope. Also, during said weeks they had got to know each other a lot better, spending time together whenever El was free from work and staying in on weekends. They were always laughing and teasing each other, but they also had learnt to recognize when the other was having a bad day. Whenever that happened they tried to cheer their friend up, they just couldn't stand seeing each other hurt or in a bad mood.

Mike still had his bad days when everything became too much and he would curse whoever gave him the chance to continue living. Sometimes he would get angry or sad for no reason while a confused El tried to figure out what had happened. It was usually nothing in particular and all at once, she soon learned, which made it harder for her to help him. If something specific was bothering him she could try to change it or make it go away, but how could she do that when *nothing* was wrong? However, she would still wrap her arms around Mike and tell him that she was there for him and that everything would be better. He believed her.

El also had her bad days. Mundane things would happen to her at work, a rude customer or a bussy day at Benny's Dinner made her less cheerful than she usually was, but visiting Mike at hospital every day after work made things way better. Even though it was in depressing circumstances, getting to meet and speak with his whole

family (yes, even Ted, who was glad to see Mike had such a gorgeous *lady friend*) and friends made her days ten times brighter. Also, she could run her hands through Mike's black, silky hair without him noticing it. *What? She couldn't help it.*

However, those visits were not enough sometimes. She still suffered from nightmares caused by the hell she had to go through when she was a little child, and sometimes they would keep her up all night. Mike knew she had those, how could he not? Her terrified screams could possibly be heard from miles away, and the living room in her tiny apartment was no exception. He never told her that he heard her, though. He didn't want to make her feel embarrassed or guilty for waking him up, so he just stayed awake debating whether or not to go into her room and hold her in his arms until she could fall asleep again. He never did.

The days after the nightmares kicked in were always the roughest. No visit to the hospital or generous tips from lovely customers could make those days better. She wore dark circles under her eyes and a permanent frown on her face. Mike knew that, so when she arrived home, the first thing she would see was her tall, temporary roommate smiling down at her. He was always offering to watch a movie or asking her to order some delicious food so that he could at least imagine what it tasted like (he never cared about any of the food she ordered, he was just too busy staring at her brightening face upon seeing her favorite meals ready for her to eat).

That day was a bad one for El. She had been having nightmares for three nights in a row and she was consequently exhausted. She had been a mess at work, not being able to put her fake customer service smile on, messing up her orders and snapping at Benny when he gently brought her to an empty corner of the Dinner to ask her what was wrong. She had expected her day to get better once she went to visit Mike at hospital, but she couldn't have been more wrong.

When she arrived, she could immediately see something was off. Karen was talking to a doctor outside Mike's room, and Lucas and Will (whose bosses were empathic enough to let them leave work earlier so that they could see their friend) were looking at each other with concern written all over their faces. While El got closer to them, they both noticed the girl and stood up.

“Hey guys” said a worried El “is something wrong?”

Lucas and Will looked at each other before responding. “It’s just-“ Lucas began, but was soon cut off by Will

“Mike’s gotten worse”

El could feel her world start spinning and her heart clench with fear “What do you mean by *worse*? Is he okay? Is he dying?”

“He’s not dying, at least not yet. His body isn’t responding properly to the blood transfusions he received and his heart is not beating appropriately. Doctors are doing the best they can, but they say he has to wake up soon. If not...” Lucas couldn’t finish his sentence

El began panicking, too entranced in her own fear to give the blood transfusion part a second thought, her head too busy making up scenarios where he *died*. No, that can’t happen. She can’t lose him. With her eyes beginning to water, she moved forward until she reached Karen and the doctor. Once Karen took notice of the crying young girl by her side, she hugged her tightly.

“Oh, dear. He’ll be fine. We just have to be patient” she told El, her motherly tone calming her down a bit

“Don’t worry, young lady. I’m doctor Owens, and me and my team promise to do everything we can to help Mr. Wheeler” said the doctor

What if everything they can do isn’t enough? Trying to shake the thought out of her mind, she spoke. “Can I- can I see him?”

After silently asking doctor Owens for approval, Karen signed El to the door, indicating that she could go in. When she entered and saw Mike, she couldn’t contain the sob that escaped her lips. He was paler than usual, surrounded by and connected to even more machines than before. She approached him carefully, as if one misstep could make him stop breathing. She couldn’t speak to him, not that time. Instead, she caressed his forehead with her fingertips, worry filling her body when she felt him colder than ever. He still looked handsome, his freckles contrasting against his pale skin, pitch black

hair falling around his head like a halo. She spent some minutes just moving her fingers across his face, tracing every outline she could find, and with a final forehead kiss, she said goodbye.

When she left the room she saw that Nancy and her partners, Steve and Jonathan had arrived. She had met them the previous week and she thought they were amazing. Jonathan was Will's brother and they shared the same shy but sweet personality, while Steve was bubbly and outgoing. Nancy and those two complemented one another perfectly, and what once had seemed weird (*who on earth has two boyfriends?*) now was completely understandable. After talking with them for a while and hugging everyone goodbye, El left the hospital and started making her way home.

The cold wind hit her in the face, but even that couldn't slap her back to reality. Her head couldn't stop spinning. How was she going to tell Mike about this? Was she even going to tell him anything? She didn't want to break her 'friends don't lie' rule, but she wasn't sure telling him would be a good idea. She didn't want him to freak out over what could be nothing, but she also knew they had to hurry in finding a way for him to return to his body. She wasn't ready to say goodbye, and she sure as hell wouldn't sit around and let him go that easily.

She couldn't come to a conclusion fast enough, noticing she had arrived to her apartment building. She tried to compose herself inside the elevator, cleaning any track of tears left and practicing a fake smile which ended up looking more like a grimace. Deciding to drop her façade and stop trying to act like she had the best day of her life, she entered her apartment.

Right upon entering she could see Mike's face smiling at her from the living room, him making his way to her. He could sense that something was wrong, but he thought that only the nightmares had caused her to have that sad expression on her face. He couldn't help but worry when El didn't even try to smile back at him.

"Hey", he greeted her. "Bad day at work?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that" she said, shrugging and trying to look as normal as she could.

“Why don’t you call that pizza place where they make-“

“I’m not hungry. Thanks for the suggestion, though”

Mike frowned. She had never rejected his food offerings before. Something must be really wrong. He thought about different ways to cheer her up, but his brain could only make one sentence. “Well, okay. That place makes pretty good looking food, though. Maybe we can go together someday if I go back to normal” *Seriously, Wheeler? Have you just asked her out in the worst existing moment?*

Did he ask her on a date? His words brought butterflies to El’s stomach. However, she couldn’t stop her heart from breaking as she saw the guy standing in front of her. Maybe he wouldn’t live to make that date possible. How would she be able to watch him go if things went wrong? The mere thought brought tears to her eyes and made her heart stop for a second

Mike could see the change on her face as her eyes filled with tears she was trying to fight back. Was his invitation that terrible? No, that can’t be. He suddenly remembered: *the nightmares*. His heart broke for the girl in front of him while he wondered what her nightmares were about- they must be terrible to leave her that broken. He suddenly wanted nothing else than to hold her and try to take away all her pain. Before he could stop himself, he spoke

“Come here” he told her, voice soft but demanding and *oh so loving*. El felt herself melt and she let him tug her by her sleeve, pulling her flush against him. She hid her head in the crook of his neck while Mike wrapped his arms tightly around her, one on her waist and one on her shoulders, running his fingers through the girl’s hair. He rocked them back and forth on his heels while whispering softly in her ear.

“Shhh, everything will be okay. I’ll make it okay. You’re with me, nothing bad will ever happen to you again. *I promise.*”

It’s not what can happen to me, El thought but didn’t say it out loud. Instead, she broke down crying in the boy’s arms. The way he protected her softened her insides and she couldn’t hold back, not anymore. His embrace only made her fear grow. She didn’t know

how she would be able to go on without being able to be in his arms again. She had never depended on someone, always taking care of herself and finding peace in solitude. However, Mike had turned her life upside down in the best of ways and she didn't want to go back to the way things were before she met him. She didn't want to be alone anymore.

They had hugged multiple times during the time they spent together, but this embrace was by far the most intimate of all. It was usually Mike who needed to be held and he was okay within minutes, but this time El couldn't bring herself to calm down. Every tear she shed hurt Mike in a way he had never felt before, which made him hold her tighter and tighter as time passed, her head burrowing deeper into him as if she wanted to disappear.

Slowly, El's sobs became only distant tears here and there. Mike took that as a sign that she was feeling better, so he let her go putting the slightest of distances between them, far enough to see her face but close enough for their noses to touch.

"Do you feel any better?" Mike asked in a hushed whisper

"Yes, I do. Thanks for taking care of me" El told him, sniffing

"Don't thank me. I'd do it over and over again if it meant you'd be fine" he told her sincerely, his eyes drifting to her lips.

El saw where he was looking at and couldn't help but do the same. His lips looked so comforting and inviting and *close*. Only a few centimeters closer and they would be brushing hers. She debated in her mind if she should close the distance, but the debate ended when she felt Mike's lips on her cheek. It wasn't a kiss on her lips, but it still was enough for her heart to do flip flops in her chest and her brain to go completely blank.

Mike couldn't believe what he was about to do. He wanted to kiss her *so fucking badly*, but he decided to try her reactions by kissing her on her cheek first. Even though it wasn't as intimate as the kiss he really wanted to give her, it still sent goosebumps on his spine and left his lips tingling. He backed away slightly, starting to lean in again and close his eyes to *finally* join their lips together.

However, every good sensation left him as sharp, deep pain spread all over his body. It felt like fire was burning him down to ashes and he just... couldn't breathe. He became paralyzed before falling to the floor on his knees, not being able to stand anymore. *This is the end.* El watched him as he fell screaming in agony, and she knew the moment had come. He was dying and there was nothing she could do to stop it from happening. As she kneeled to hold him during his last moments, not knowing what to say or if she should even speak, his screaming stopped and apparently so did the pain. It went as fast as it had come, and the terrifying moment had finished after just a few seconds which had felt like years. Both Mike and El found themselves on the floor, confused and scared, not understanding how one moment they were about to kiss and a second later Mike had been face to face with death.

"What the hell was that?" Mike asked to no one in particular, barely being able to breathe with short, ragged intakes of air.

El wanted to pretend like she didn't know, but she couldn't. She couldn't hide the truth from him and possibly put him in more danger. They had to do something, anything before he ran out of time. They had to act quickly, and it would be easier if Mike knew the truth.

"Fucking hell, you scared me shitless" El told him, giving him a brief hug and letting go so that she could see his face when he found out what she had seen that day in hospital. "There something you need to know. I wasn't crying because I had a bad day at work. Today, when I went to visit you..." she stopped, not being able to keep talking or even look him in the eye

"What happened, El? Please look at me" Mike urged, grabbing her chin between his fingers and lifting her face until she met his gaze

"You're dying, Mike. Your heart is failing and your body is giving up" she said, voice cracking at the end of the sentence

"What?" he asked, not believing what she had told him. *Oh, so that was the pain I felt. My body letting go.*

"We have to do something, we have to stop this. The doctors said

they would do their best but I don't know if their best is enough and I... I can't lose you Mike. I just can't." said El, crying for what felt like the hundredth time in such a short period of time.

Mike was speechless. Did he want to live? He had been so sure about his decision, but now death wasn't as tempting. He was so shocked and *confused* he couldn't even cry. He knew one thing, though. He didn't want El to keep on crying because of him. "Hey, hey. Stop. I won't die. We'll find a way to fix this"

"There's no way to fix this!" El snapped. "We have tried everything, *every-fucking-thing* we could but nothing worked! There's nothing we can do to-" El stopped speaking abruptly when an idea came to her mind. Why hadn't she thought about this before? She wasn't sure it would help, but this was their last hope

"El?" asked a confused Mike. Why had she stopped talking?

"I know this may not even work, but my dad has a friend who supposedly can talk to spirits and stuff. Maybe we can go to him. Maybe he can help us."

Mike didn't know what to say. Someone had already lied to them saying something similar, so why should they believe another person? "El, I don't know-"

"We don't have time for i-don't-knows. You're in danger and there's nothing else we can do, is there? Besides, I know this guy, he's been my dad's friend for ages, I know he wouldn't lie to us that way"

Considering everything, it wasn't such a bad idea and El's enthusiasm made Mike change his mind. They had nothing to lose if they tried and wasting time by sitting in the apartment sulking wasn't going to help either. "Okay, let's do it. Should we call him tomorrow?"

"Yeah"

"Okay"

They fell into silence, sitting next to each other and processing everything that had happened until Mike spoke again

"The nightmares" he said while looking at El. "I thought you were crying because of your nightmares"

"You know I have nightmares?" El asked, afraid he would judge her

"I heard you every night, El. Every night. I wanted to go and help you, but I didn't want to cross any boundaries"

"You wouldn't have done nothing wrong. They're all about him, you know? *Every single one.*" El told him, heart swelling for his considerate words. He was sweet enough to be concerned but respectful enough to let her have her personal space

Mike knew who she was talking about, he had heard her begging for her *papa* to stop, to have mercy. "Then I'm sorry I didn't go" he said, feeling guilty

"Don't be sorry. Thanks for caring for me even from the distance." she told him with a smile. Before they could become silent again, El asked Mike something before her brain could even process the idea

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you sleep with me tonight? I really don't want to be alone and I don't think I can stand another sleepless night. Not after today"

Mike gulped. *Oh my fucking god she wants to share a bed with me.* In spite of his initial shock, he wouldn't miss the opportunity for anything in the world. Still, he wanted to be sure that she actually wanted that. "Are you sure? I mean I *obviously* want to... I- I mean-

"Please, Mike. Having you near is the best way for me to be calm"

Without needing to hear any more words, he stood up, offering his hand to help her do the same. El took it and went straight to her bedroom without letting go. She excused herself to the bathroom, where she changed into her nicest pajamas and brushed her teeth, heart racing at the thought that she would sleep with Mike. She was sure it would help with the nightmares, but it was also an excuse for having him close (just to check if he's alright, *of course*)

When she left the bathroom she saw Mike awkwardly pacing around her room. She laughed at the image, which caused him to turn around and notice her presence. *She looks so cute in her pajamas.* El made her way to the bed where she instantly laid over her bedsheets. She liked to sleep wrapped in them, but knowing that Mike couldn't do that made her avoid them that night. Noticing that Mike wasn't going to do the same anytime soon, she spoke

"You know you can lie next to me, right?" she said while chuckling

Mike slowly walked to the bed, lying as far from El as he could. He knew she was the one who came up with this idea, but he still didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable

"Fuck, the lights" El said, standing up and making a quick run to turn off the switch and let darkness consume the room. She took the chance to lie closer to Mike, both on their sides, facing each other.

"Hi" she whispered, trying to look at him with the help of the little dim moonlight that came from her window

"Hi" he whispered back, smiling like a lovestruck fool

Seeing him smile made El go crazy with feelings, and she couldn't stop her hand from going through Mike's hair just as she had done some hours ago in hospital. However, this felt *much* better, having him close and awake and warm against her hand. Mike's breath hitched in his throat and he let out a soft hum of contentment. He closed his eyes enjoying the feeling, not opening them when El spoke

"We'll call my dad's friend tomorrow, first thing in the morning. You'll be fine. And I warn you: If you die, I'll bring you back only to kill you myself for leaving me"

Mike let out a breathy laugh at her joke, fully believing for a second that everything might be okay someday. He frowned in confusion when she felt El's hand slip out of his hair and her body shift, only to blush some seconds later when he felt her pressing her back flush against his torso and curling up to fit better against him. He instinctively wrapped an arm around El's waist, and he felt her relax completely. *I'm spooning her. I'm spooning El,* he told himself not

believing his luck. And the best part? They fit together perfectly, like puzzle pieces.

El wasn't one to make such bold moves, but this had felt like the right thing to do. Now, as she was warm in his arms, she knew she had made the right decision. She had never felt safer than she did in that moment and realization hit her harder than lighting: she would never feel as safe in any other place that wasn't next to him. Before she could fall asleep, she remembered something he had said earlier

"Mike? Are you asleep?"

"Not yet, why?" he answered in a sleepy voice

"What you said earlier about going out for dinner together, right before everything happened... Were you asking me on a date?"

Mike's hands began to sweat as he felt more awake than ever. What should he say? "I-uh, maybe, only if you want to. It was a stupid idea, though. I'm sorry, I didn't"

"Mike?"

"Yes?"

"I'd love to go on a date with you" El told him, her smile almost tangible in her words

"Oh, okay. Cool" he said, smiling with relief. *I'm the luckiest asshole in the whole world.*

"Cool."

Neither of them spoke again, feeling content about how their relationship was taking a new shape. Mike squeezed El in his arms and she cuddled closer in response. He could die right then and there and he wouldn't even mind.

That night, the nightmares stayed away, knowing that if they decided to come someone was willing to fight them with his own hands.

Notes for the Chapter:

Mike and El are just so cute I wanna cry

8. Hurry boy, it's waiting there for you

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello there, lovely readers! This is the longest chapter I have ever written and it's because of you guys. You inspire me to challenge myself and reassure me when I think my writing sucks. As I said in a comment, I write for and because of all of you. I hope I can make your day better by letting you join Mike and El in their crazy adventure.

This chapter mentions God and a point of view about religion and spirituality. By no means I'm trying to offend or disrespect anyone and if you believe in God (whatever your God may be) I hope he blesses you with good things every day of your life.

If someone had told Mike some weeks ago that he would be waking up next to the prettiest girl he had ever seen after having spent the whole night cuddled up with her, he would've laughed in their face. However, what could have seemed crazy back then was his reality that morning. He had woken up to the feeling of someone stirring in his arms and while he had been confused for a second, he then remembered everything that had happened the day before. Worry filled him as he remembered the pain he had felt right when he was about to kiss El. *El.*

All his previous thoughts were long forgotten when he remembered that that *someone* in his arms was no other than El Hopper. His eyes snapped open and he looked down at the girl who in the middle of the night had shifted positions so that she could lie her head on his chest, right where his heart was, and wrap her small arm around Mike's torso. He then noticed his own position: he was lying on his back, his left arm surrounding El, hand lying on the curve of her waist while his right one was reaching out to hold her visible hand. *She looks so beautiful when she sleeps.*

He smiled at the sight, wishing they could stay like that forever. That couldn't happen, though. They had to talk to the Chief's friend as soon as possible, and if that didn't work they had to hurry and find

another solution. With that in mind, he started to run his hands through El's hair in an attempt to wake her up. She moved slightly, burying herself deeper into Mike's body and humming in contentment. Mike laughed noticing that his actions wouldn't be enough to wake her, so he got his face close to her ear and he spoke

"El, sweetheart, you've got to wake up" he whispered, unsure about his term of endearment but going with it anyway. "We have to find your dad's friend and ask him to help us"

This seemed to work better as he could see El slowly start opening her eyes, her eyelashes fluttering. It was El's turn to remember where she was (more importantly *who* she was with). When she opened her eyes fully, she lifted her gaze only to find another pair of eyes looking at her with a special glow in their look that almost made her shiver. *I wouldn't mind waking up to this every morning from now on.* She felt herself getting lost in his eyes and could sense a smile forming in her face

"Good morning" she croaked in her morning voice which Mike found completely adorable

"Good morning, did you sleep well?"

"Better than I have in a long time" El answered honestly, not forgetting the fact that she hadn't had any of her usual nightmares. "And you?"

"Me too. Best night in years" he told her, moving a few strands of rebel hair away from her face. He was sorry to break such a magical moment but he had to if he ever wanted to have another one. "I think we have to get up and get going. What time is it?"

El reluctantly broke their embrace, losing the feeling of warmth that Mike's body was providing her and sitting up. A wave of sadness and worry came over her when she remembered why they had to get up. She didn't realize her face showed what she was thinking until she felt Mike sit up next to her and grab her hand

"Hey, don't worry. We'll figure this one out together" he told her after seeing her changing expression

El felt ridiculous. She should be the one comforting him, not the other way round. She couldn't help her emotions, though. In this time they spent together Mike had become her weakness and if something was to happen to him she didn't think she could handle it.

If Mike had become El's weakness, she had become his strength. He was also worried about everything that may happen. Every scenario was terrifying, the thought of dying making his head spin with fear and the thought of being finally back in his body paralyzing him. He couldn't handle neither life nor death, but he knew he wouldn't give up without putting up a fight. Not now when he had found someone that could show him again what being *really* alive felt like. He would fight for himself, he would fight for his family, he would fight for his friends and he would fight for *her*.

El squeezed his hand in response before letting it go and reaching for her cellphone.

"It's 10:30. God, my dad will kill me if I wake him up this early on a Saturday" she said, chuckling. Hopper wasn't a morning person, waking up as late as he could on weekends and using his mornings for 'coffee and contemplation' when he was forced to wake up early and go to the police station. However, El knew that his love for her was deeper than his hate for being woken up, so she immediately requested an Uber and left her cellphone in her bed. Hopper's house was on the outskirts of the small town of Hawkins and she didn't have a car to get them there.

Mike frowned when he saw her do so. "Shouldn't you call him and tell him you're going there first?". If the Chief hated mornings he wouldn't be pleased when he heard that someone had showed up at his doorstep unannounced

"If there's anything that he hates more than waking up early it's definitely phone calls. He's not going to be pissed off when he finds out I'm the one who's there" El explained. "Would you mind closing your eyes? I've got to..." she said, showing him some clothes she had gotten out of her dresser

Mike nodded, his mouth suddenly too dry to say anything. *She was going to undress in front of him.* He closed his eyes, tempted to secretly

open them. He didn't, though. Even if the sight would have been marvelous, he respected El and her privacy. However, that didn't stop the images that his brain made up of her in nothing but her underwear. He felt the room turn a hundred times hotter and his heart start to speed up, but before he could get carried away, he heard El's voice

"I'm done here, you can look. I'm going to brush my teeth before our ride arrives"

He opened his eyes to find her staring at him, wearing a pair of light-wash jeans, a white sweater made out of the softest looking material he had ever seen and some beat up white (which looked kind of grey from using them too much) converse. She was carrying a caramel colored trench coat on her arm that he was sure would fit her perfectly and match both her hair and her eyes. She also had a simple black purse on her hand. She looked gorgeous and he couldn't help but feel terribly underdressed in that stupid hospital gown.

He realized he had been staring at her for far too long when she saw an amused smirk form on her face. "O-okay" was the only thing he could say, nervousness taking over him. Even though they had already crossed a few lines, her mere presence sometimes left him speechless.

Laughing at the awkward boy she had in front of her, she hurried to the bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth. She didn't like wearing makeup and it was not like she had time to apply any of it-their ride was waiting for them downstairs.

She rushed out the bathroom and called for Mike, who followed her to the elevator and out the building. She greeted their driver while opening the door, giving Mike time to get on the car without looking suspicious. She then hopped on and told the man where she wanted to go, turning to look at Mike.

To say he was bewildered was an understatement. He had been locked up inside El's apartment for weeks and going back to the real world was particularly shocking. He had forgotten how noisy cars could be or the amount of people that wandered the streets in spite of living in a small town. He was taking the view in like a blind person

who could suddenly see again, thing that El found adorable.

Mike turned when he felt her gaze on him and couldn't stop a huge grin from forming in his face when he saw her expression. She had a small smile on her lips, cheeks flushed from the cold (and maybe *something else*) but what caught him were her eyes. They were looking directly at him with what could only be described as adoration. Something was going on between them and they wouldn't bother to hide it. This may be their last moments together, so why lie? Mike felt himself melt and reached for the girl's hand, running his thumb across her knuckles.

They couldn't speak to each other in another person's presence, but no words were needed for what they were feeling. They just knew. So when the driver started making small talk with El and flirting with her, Mike's jealous expression was no surprise to El, who was trying to repress her laugh. A guy was hitting on her right in front of her-

Her *what*?

They weren't anything more than friends, they hadn't even *kissed*, for God's sake. But her feelings said otherwise and when Mike huffed in annoyance when the driver asked her if she had a boyfriend, she knew he didn't see her only as his friend, too.

"No, I don't, but I'm kinda seeing someone at the moment. Sorry." was her response, which made Mike smile proudly to himself. She said she was *seeing someone* and he could only hope he was talking about him rather than making up an excuse to shut this man up.

They arrived to their destination shortly after that. They left the car as soon as it had stopped, paying the driver who didn't return El's goodbye and took off driving as fast as his engine allowed him to.

"Rude" said El, rolling her eyes

Mike laughed; "He's just butthurt because you rejected him"

Laughing with him, El started walking towards her dad's house. It wasn't anything big or fancy, with its wooden structure and old fashioned windows, but to her it was beautiful nonetheless. It had

been the first place she could call home and no matter where she moved to during her life, she knew she could always go back. That's what had given the small cabin-like structure its charm. It was cozy and warm and filled with love and simply *home*.

Something caught her attention before she could reach the door. There was another car parked besides Jim's. Mike seemed to notice, too

"That car..." he began, mouth falling wide open "That car is Will's mother's car"

"What?" El asked, confused. She thanked her gods for having those streets empty so that she could respond to Mike without looking like she was talking alone to everybody else.

"Yeah, that's Joyce's car. Do you think...?"

"Oh, god. This is crazy. Looks like we would've met one way or another, right? Since now I might be Will's new sister" she said, trying to shrug the weird feeling that idea gave her. She always wanted her family to expand but now that it was possibly happening she didn't feel ready

Mike squeezed her shoulder supportively. "Will's like a brother to me, you know? He's great. If this" he signaled to the cars "means what we think it means, you'll love having him in your life. John is great, too. He's like the big brother I never had. And Joyce's amazing. You'll love her"

"So then I would be like your sister?" El asked teasingly, arching her brows

"What?! No! No" he told her desperately. He didn't know what they were but she definitely didn't fit into the sister category to him

"Why not?" she asked, playing fool. She wanted to push his buttons a little.

"B-because we... because I..." he said, not knowing how to continue. He wasn't known for being smooth, that was for sure, but he had never felt more shy and awkward in his life

His train of thoughts was interrupted when he felt El's lips on his cheek. "I understand, Mike. I was just teasing" she told him, having mercy on the poor boy whose face had turned crimson. "Come on" she urged him, tugging on his sleeve and moving forward to the house's entrance

Before knocking on the door, El turned around. "I'm not going to tell him about you, he'll think I'm kidding. I'm just going to say that I think my house is haunted or something and that I need someone to tell me how to get rid of ghosts"

"That's fine by me" Mike agreed, thanking her silently for being so clever.

El then rang the doorbell, thinking they would have to wait for at least five minutes before Jim would open the door. She was about to turn around and talk to Mike, when she saw the door's handle moving and then her dad appearing in front of her.

Mike gulped with fear. *He was meeting El's dad.* He knew Hopper couldn't see him, but he was still intimidating as hell. He was as tall as Mike, maybe a few inches taller, but that was not what worried him. While Mike was skinny and lanky, the Chief was all broad shoulders and arms that could break all Mike's bones if he wished. He had every intention to keep seeing El if he could return to his normal life (and to keep hugging her, holding her hand, sleeping next to her, hopefully start kissing her, calling her his girlfr- *wait. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.*) and so he knew he would eventually have to properly meet him and introduce himself. Maybe being Will's friend would help.

El, on the contrary, was happy to see her dad. She loved him deeply and she didn't see him enough these days. She could see Jim's face turn from an annoyed one to a soft, happy expression.

"Hi, kid" he told her, giving her a hug. "Come in"

Jim moved from the doorway and let her daughter in, not knowing that Mike was following her closely. El took a look of her surroundings. Yeah, definitely the same house she had lived until some months ago. She was about to talk until she heard a feminine

voice coming from the stairs

“Jim, love, who was it?” a woman spoke. El turned around and saw her. She had big, brown eyes and shoulder length brown hair. She was still wearing her pajamas which showed that she was petite and skinny, and in spite of being visibly in her forties she still looked youthful. *She’s really pretty*, El thought.

When the woman saw El, she stopped going down the stairs and gave Jim a look of terror mixed with surprise. Jim looked at her equally terrified, and El felt as if she was the parent who had caught her son in an awkward situation. She couldn’t help but laugh at them, deciding to save them from that uncomfortable situation

“Hi, um, I’m El” she told the woman. “Nice to meet you”

Jim’s face softened and so did the woman’s. Mike started laughing with El, finding the situation amusing. He wrapped one arm around El’s shoulder for support and El cuddled into him trying to be as subtle as possible.

The woman made her way down the stairs to give El a hug, which left Mike feeling cold after losing El’s body heat. “Oh, darling” she said “I’m sorry we have to meet this way. I’m Joyce and I’m-“

“She’s my girlfriend, Ellie” Jim finished for her. “We’ve been meaning to tell you and Joyce’s sons, but things kept getting in the way”

“We were going to invite you all over for dinner” Joyce continued, letting El go “but Will, my son, has a friend who is in hospital and everything got complicated. John is Will’s friend’s brother in law and he loves him, too, so it was impossible for any of them to show up”

Mike started laughing at the ironic situation and El discretely nudged him with her elbow, trying not to laugh with him. “Yeah, I know. I’ve met them both” she said, smiling

“Really?” asked a confused Joyce. “I didn’t know you guys had met”

“Yeah” El said. “I’m Mike’s friend too” she continued, slightly turning her gaze to find Mike, who was looking at her with a soft smile. She felt herself blush before continuing. “I met Will and John when I

went to visit him at hospital. They're both amazing people, we get on really well"

Jim raised an eyebrow, not having heard about this Mike boy before. He was about to say something, but Joyce beat him to it

"That's amazing to hear, honey! But please don't tell them about our relationship, we want to talk to them ourselves"

El nodded and smiled at Joyce. She seemed kind and El could tell that she was in love with her father by the way they looked at each other. She wasn't so uncertain about his father's new partner anymore, thinking how fun her life would be with Will and John in her family.

"So" Jim spoke, "I think the occasion calls for a triple decker Eggo Extravaganza" he said, looking at El gratefully for taking this whole situation in the best way possible

Mike and Joyce looked confused while El's mouth started to water. She hadn't had breakfast and was starving, but they didn't have time to lose. They needed this guy's address, and fast.

"That sounds amazing, dad, but I have to go soon." She then saw Mike and Joyce's puzzled faces and she explained. "The Eggo Extravaganza is a tradition dad and I have. Ever since he adopted me, every time I was feeling down or we had something to celebrate, we would have it. It consists of three eggos piled up with mountains of whipped cream and every kind of candy you could find on top"

Joyce laughed at the explanation while Mike still looked confused. "Was your dad trying to give you diabetes?" he asked El, whispering in her ear. He saw her shiver at their closeness and heard her mumbling a low 'shut up'.

Jim looked confused, too, but for a different reason. "Why do you have to leave soon? Is everything okay?"

El gulped, not wanting to lie to her dad but knowing it would be better to do so. "Yeah, everything's fine. I just needed to know where uncle Tom lives"

“Uncle Tom? You have a brother?” Joyce asked Jim

“No, he’s just my best friend. You know, Tom Perez, the one from high school.” He explained, then turned to El. “Why do you need to talk to Tom?” he asked, frowning in confusion

“I think my house is haunted and I need him to help me get rid of the ghosts” El said, grimacing. That was the worst lie she could have thought of, but the damage was done.

“Your house? Haunted?” Jim asked in disbelief

Before El could respond, she heard Joyce speak. “Jim, don’t be like that. It’s possible! Some years ago the lights in my house wouldn’t stop flickering and the phone rang and rang even though nobody was calling. We changed the wires in the electric system and it still kept happening. It only stopped when I lit up some sage, which is said to keep spirits away”

“Whatever” Jim mumbled, still not believing in supernatural things. “He lives in Lakewood 3498, if it helps. But I don’t think he will be able to help you. I mean, ghosts, El? Really?”

“Really” El said, trying to sound convinced. “I swear he’s the one who can help me. Thanks, dad” she said, giving him a quick hug. She checked the time on her phone. Twelve pm. *Fuck, we have to hurry.* An idea came to her mind

“Hey, dad. Can I- Would you lend me your car?” she said, knowing it was almost impossible. He had never lent her the car, only his police truck, but she had to give it a shot.

Jim was about to say no but then he saw desperation on his daughter’s face. He hadn’t bought all that ‘haunted house’ crap but if his daughter was in trouble and he could help, he would. Sighing, he took his car keys from the small coffee table that was in the living room and he tossed them to El. “You’re lucky I love you, he said. “And that I also have the police truck if I need it”

El smiled brightly and looked at Mike, eyes twinkling. He was surprised by the Chief’s softness when it came to El, but he could

understand it. He would also give her the moon in her hands if she asked.

Hugging her dad again while thanking him and then giving Joyce a quick hug and a promise to see her again soon, El said her goodbyes and rushed out of the house with Mike taking the lead this time. They got on the car and started driving away. Tom's house was in the city center, near her house and the hospital, so going there would take a while.

"So, your dad seems cool" Mike told El

"Really?" El told him. "I thought you would find him a bit..."

"Intimidating? Yeah, that too" he told her with a small smile

El laughed. "He might look that way, but I swear he is like a giant teddy bear who puts on a tough guy façade. He'll like you, just wait and see" she told him, turning on the radio.

An 80s special was on and El didn't change the station. She was a sucker for eighties music and Mike seemed to be judging by his excited face. Never Gonna Give You Up finished and the radio host started talking

"My friend Dustin is so easy to rick-roll" Mike told El. "We can tell him any excuse and he'll open the video without suspecting a thing. Every time it happens he swears he won't fall for it again, but he's too naïve"

"What's rick-roll?" El asked, confused

How could El not know what being rick-rolled was? It was literally the biggest joke during middle school and- he remembered. He remembered that El didn't go to middle school, to any school for that matter. He remembered that El's life became normal only a few years ago. "Uh, being rick-rolled is a joke where you send the link of the Never Gonna Give You Up song and say it's something else. When the other person opens it, they become annoyed and yeah, that's basically it."

"I don't get why people get annoyed, though. It's a great song" El said

“They get annoyed because the song is the most obnoxious song ever, *duh*” Mike told her matter-of-factly

“I think it’s a good song” El told him, shrugging

“It’s annoying”

“Your face is annoying” she replied to him, laughing when he gasped in fake disbelief

“And your face is cute” he told her, smirking when she blushed

The radio host introduced the next song and the first chords of Africa by Toto started playing. El turned the volume up and started belting up the lyrics. She had quite a nice voice, missing a few notes here and there but singing melodically overall. Mike, however, was a terrible singer. He couldn’t hit a single note, but that didn’t stop him from joining El.

“IT’S GONNA TAKE A LOT TO DRAG ME AWAY FROM YOU, THERE’S NOTHING THAT A HUNDRED MEN OR MORE COULD EVER DOOOOOOOOOO” they screamed-singed together. Once they couldn’t contain themselves anymore, they roared with laughter. It was nice to have somebody to laugh with until tears of joy came out of your eyes, even if they were in a tense moment.

Once their laughter died down, the song had already finished and the radio was playing Every Breath You Take instead.

“Isn’t this song kind of creepy?” Mike asked El

“Yeah, it is. But it’s romantic in its own way, too” she said

The rest of their trip was spent in comfortable silence, both listening to the songs the radio played. After about half an hour, they arrived to Tom’s house. It was a small semidetached house with a big window in the front and beige walls. El had been there a few times and every time she went the outside of the house was painted in different colors. Tom said it was because colors attract different energies, so he changed the color depending on his needs. El never believed it was possible, but now she wasn’t so sure anymore.

El and Mike climbed up the stairs and rang the doorbell. After waiting for some minutes, they looked at each other worriedly, thinking that he may not be home, but then the door opened.

A man in his early fifties was standing in front of them, wearing a dark green polo shirt and jeans. He was skinny and way shorter than Mike. He had brown green eyes and prominent eyebrows that framed his face, making up for the lack of hair on his shaved head. He was wearing prescription glasses that made his eyes look bigger than what they really were, giving him a googly eyed look. As soon as he saw El, he smiled brightly

"Elle Belle! What a nice surprise!" he then turned and gave Mike a confused look. "Who is this young man that came with you? Why is he wearing a hospital gown?"

Mike couldn't believe what was happening. First, how could a man like *this* be Hopper's best friend? And second, how could he see him?

El seemed as surprised as him. "You- you can see him!" she exclaimed, face bright with happiness. She turned around and looked at Mike. "See, I told you he could help!"

"Of course I can see him, Ellie. What are you talking about?" Tom asked, confused

"Let's go inside, uncle. There's so much we need to tell you" El said, entering the house followed by Mike.

After offering them something to drink which they both refused, the three went to the living room, El and Mike sharing the couch and Tom sitting on a chair in front of them

"Well" Tom said. "First of all, what's your name?" he said while looking at Mike

"I'm Mike, sir. Mike Wheeler. Nice to meet you"

"Oh, drop the sir. I'm Tom to you" he replied with a smile. "What brings you here, kids? Are you in trouble?"

El and Mike looked at each other and nodded in sync. Then, El

started explaining. She told Tom everything, from how she met Mike to the last thing that had happened to them in her apartment, the pain Mike had felt. Tom listened with a serious expression, not questioning anything he was being told. Mike was more certain every minute that passed that the man could give them some answers, judging by the way he nodded like he seemed to know what El was about to say next.

“And yeah, that’s what’s going on. We don’t know why I can see Mike, why this is happening to him, what that pain was or how we can make him go back to normal” El finished, feeling relieved to be able to talk about this with someone she trusted

Tom got up without saying a word and went to his bookshelf. He started looking through his books and he stopped when he found the one he was looking for. He took it out of the library and returned with it to the chair. Once he sat down, he spoke

“Well, kids, you seem to be stuck in one hell of a mess. Your first question is an easy one, El. Destiny” he told her

“Destiny?” Mike asked

“As you heard. There’s an energy that writes all of our lives and how they are supposed to be. I don’t like to call it God, so I call it ‘It’. It rules our lives from the moment we’re born to the moment we die. I can see you because I’m connected to that energy, I’ve been studying and working with everything It is since I was a child. El, however, can see you because she’s your destiny, your soulmate”

“I’m his what?” El asked, confused but happy to be getting answers. She had never been one to believe in energies or God or whatever, but she would willingly accept any existing answer to her questions.

“His soulmate, darling. Everybody has one, he happens to be yours and you happen to be his. You can see him for his soul, for who he truly is, so you don’t need his body to acknowledge his presence”

El and Mike looked at each other like they were meeting for the first time. Tom’s sayings had changed how things were between them and they both knew it. They had feelings for one another, yes, but

knowing that that was the way things were supposed to be changed everything. It made things more real, more... *intense*. If they had felt lovestruck before, in that moment the feeling grew and grew. If love was fire, they were burning in flames. They were in love and neither of them could (*or wanted to*) deny it. They didn't question what Tom had said, how could they? Deep down inside them, they both knew it was true. They had always known.

"Now, this is the complicated part. Mike, you're stuck between life and death because It decided to give you a second chance at life. It knew it wasn't your moment to go, so it gave you time to consider your decision"

"Decision?" El asked Mike "What is he talking about, Mike?"

"El, I-"

"You need to decide, Mike, if you want to live. Once you have truly committed to being alive, you'll be able to go back to your body" Tom said, cutting him off

El didn't understand what Tom was saying. Mike wanted to live, right? She was about to speak, but was interrupted by Tom

"There's no time for chit chat, El. He'll explain what he has to explain later. Now, he has to hurry up" he said, turning to Mike. "The pain you felt was your body giving up, kid. Your body can only be some time without its soul, see?" he told him, opening the book he had recently grabbed. It was in a weird language that neither Mike nor El could understand, but it had illustrations of some guy's soul leaving him

"This is what happened to you" Tom continued. "This is harming for the body by itself, but when it happens also with actual body damage you have even less time to go back. That pain was your heart failing. It didn't stop completely; if it did it would have been much worse. You have to decide whether you want to live or not"

"But I want to!" Mike said exasperated. "If that's what I need to go back then I already have it."

“Do you?” asked Tom, looking at him dead in the eyes

Mike thought about it for a minute, becoming speechless. All this time he had thought he wanted to go back to life because that’s what he had been conditioned to think. He knew he didn’t want to die, his survival instincts kicking in, but did he really want to live? Was he willing to take that commitment? He had tried to kill himself less than three weeks ago and he was definitely not over the idea of leaving this world for good.

“Let’s say that Mike wants to live” El said with tears in her eyes, watching the guy next to her – her *soulmate* – doubt about something that seemed so simple only minutes ago. “How do we get him back to his body?”

“That’s it” said Tom. “He only has to make the decision and be one hundred percent sure of it. Then, It will bring him back. But he has to do it now. Once the pains start your time to decide is short, only a day or so. Your body can’t be much time without the actual you in it, and if you decided whether to live or to die a little too late, it’s completely useless. Once your body dies, you die, it’s that simple. So he has to choose wisely, before...”

“Before what?” El asked, already knowing the answer but not being able to admit it herself

“Before he runs out of time”

Notes for the Chapter:

good news: we have answers (and there's some jopper in this chapter because i just. couldn't. resist.)
bad news: we only have three more chapters left and shit's about to hit the fan

9. Don't get too close, it's dark inside

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey you guys! This chapter is an emotional rollercoaster. Some parts may be triggering, so be careful if you're triggered by mentions of suicide/self harm.

There are some... long awaited.... things in there..... too.....

I hope you like this chapter!

The trip to El's apartment was short and silent. They had left immediately after Tom cleared their doubts. In any other occasion, El would have thought of that as rude. Now, she couldn't bring herself to care. While in the car, Mike couldn't snap back to reality and El couldn't stop thinking about Tom's words. *Before he runs out of time.* She had never thought someone would be meant to be with her, but now it made absolute sense. She had just found her soulmate, the person made specifically to be with her and she was about to lose him, too. She couldn't understand why Mike hadn't chosen yet. Weren't they doing everything they could in order to bring him back to life? Didn't he want to be alive?

Max's words came to her head. She hadn't thought about what her redhead friend had said since the day she argued with Mike. Now, though, the explanation Mike had given her seemed somewhat sketchy. How could someone so young have smoked enough to ruin his lungs that way? Why had he never craved a cigarette during the time he spent with her? But most importantly, why wasn't he choosing to live?

Mike had barely realized they had left Tom's house and gotten into the car, only paying attention to his surroundings when El had shaken him by his shoulder, telling him they had arrived to her apartment building. He had spent the whole trip thinking about what Tom had said. The soulmate aspect was overwhelming, of course, but he couldn't say he was surprised. He had felt connected with El since day one, a connection he had never experienced with anyone else. What worried him was having the ability to choose between such

important decisions. He had acted on automatic pilot these two weeks, trying to find solutions for a problem he didn't even know if he wanted to solve. He couldn't choose to live just because, but dying meant that he would never have any chance to take back what he had decided.

They made their way to El's apartment in silence, and El only realized she was crying when she opened the door. She looked at Mike whose blank expression changed to one of worry and then one of utter sadness. He reached for El's face in an attempt to wipe her tears, but she stepped away from his touch. Drying her face with her sleeve and trying to calm down as much as possible, she spoke

"What's going on, Mike? You can't keep on lying to me, not anymore. Please, just tell me why you don't want to go back to your life" she told him, fresh tears falling down

Mike's heart broke at the sight. He knew that she would get mad if he told her the truth. "I don't know what's happening, El. I really want to live but-"

"Bullshit" El told him, stepping closer to him and poking him in the chest with her index finger. "If you care about me just even a little, if these two weeks meant something to you, then you *have* to tell me. Don't you trust me?"

El's words made his insides twist. Did she really think that the time with her was meaningless to him? That he didn't care about her? "I trust you, El! I trust you more than anybody else!" he told her, getting closer to her face and raising his voice, both arms going to grab his hair

"Then why the fuck do you keep lying to me?! Why do you-"

And that's when she could see it, clearer than water. He had a bandage covering his right forearm which she had always thought was because of the iv fluids he was being given, at least that's what he had told her when she asked one night. How could she have been so blind? Iv fluids would never cause enough damage to wear a bandage, only if they had gotten infected (which they hadn't, she was sure. There wasn't a weekday where she wouldn't check up on him at

hospital). Such a large wound in that area could only mean that...

Mike saw where El's eyes were fixated and he started sweating cold with fear. Lowering his arms, he opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong, but she spoke first

"What's underneath your bandage, Mike?" she said in a low voice

"I told you, it's there because of the--"

"What's *really* underneath it?" she told him, voice louder and determined

Mike lowered his gaze, ashamed. It was moment, he couldn't keep on hiding the truth. She would probably freak out and she had every right to do so, but Mike wasn't ready. He didn't want to disappoint the person who had been there for him since the moment they met, but he had no choice

"Mike, please. I *swear* I won't get mad. Please, I beg you, let me help you" El said, trying to look him in the eye so he could see the sincerity in her eyes

That did it for him. Finding El's gaze and locking eyes with her, he slowly started taking off his bandage. He removed enough of it for El to see the beginning (or the end, he wasn't sure) of his scar. El gasped, not sure if she still knew how to breathe, understanding what that scar meant. She placed her hand on top of Mike's, letting him know that he didn't have to keep on taking his bandage off. She had seen enough for everything to click in her head.

What had been silent tears had become full sobs and she couldn't tell which crying sounds were hers and which were Mike's. She sat down on the floor, not trusting her legs to keep her standing. Mike did the same, sitting in front of her

"P-please say something" he desperately begged

El couldn't get any words out, a confusing mixture of emotions in her head. None of them were anger, though. She wasn't angry at Mike, he must have had his reasons for hiding his secret for that long. She was surprised, sad, confused and desperate to heal the broken boy in front

of her. She would pick up every little piece of him and put him back together if that meant he would be happy. Not knowing what to say, she launched herself into his arms, giving him the tightest hug she could and landing in his lap, straddling it.

This is not the reaction I was waiting for, he thought. Not that he was complaining. Loving El was ten times better than angry El. Sobbing; he squeezed her back just as tight, murmuring ‘I’m sorry’ repeatedly into her curly hair while pressing his lips to her head. They stayed like that until their sobs had ceased and the only sound in the room was their troubled breathing. El broke the embrace and looked into Mike’s bloodshot eyes

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked

“I was afraid, El. When I met you, you were this perfect, cheerful girl who could brighten up everybody’s life and I didn’t want you to see me as a depressed weirdo. Then I got to know you better and not only you were perfect and kind and beautiful, you also had forgiven me for one lie. How could I admit to this? I was a coward and I still am, and I’m sorry” he told her, letting honesty handle him. “I still can’t commit fully with life because I’m *afraid*”

“Afraid of what, what do you fear?” El asked him, voice full with emotion

“I’m afraid I will mess things up again. I’m afraid that I won’t get better and I’ll try to kill myself again. I’ve been this way since I was a child and I just... I *can’t stop*. I never thought I would try to kill myself, but that night” he said, stopping to gather some courage to keep talking. El brushed her hand across his cheek, trying to show him her support. “I couldn’t help it, El. I saw the razor and I felt I had to do it. I felt it in my *bones*. I knew what I was doing was wrong but I wasn’t in control anymore”

El took a deep breath before replying, his words digging a hole in her heart. This amazing, awkward, kind hearted man was his own enemy, and he needed to be saved from himself. *Why are the greatest people the ones who suffer the most?*

She grabbed Mike’s shoulder and lightly pushed him into her, making

him wrap his arms around her waist and hide his face in the crook of her neck. She started moving her hand up and down his back in an attempt to comfort him, which caused him to nuzzle up against her neck.

“I’m sorry, *so sorry* that you had to go through that” El began. “I wish I could have helped you back then” she told him honestly

“You’re here now” he replied, voice muffled by El’s body. “That’s all that matters”

“And I will be until you get tired of me. I will always be by your side. If- if you decide you want to live, I will never leave you alone. You’ll have me, forever and always” she said sniffing. “I am not saying a love story is going to fix all your problems, though. You have to get help, Mike. You have to see a therapist, a *good* one. Someone who can help you. Things do get better, but you have to be there to see it. You also have to learn how to open up. You have amazing friends who love you and care for you, and a family who would give up their lives to see you happy. Even your asshole of a dad loves you” she told him, the last phrase earning a chuckle from Mike. “They will be there if you need them, you just have to learn how to ask for help. And I promise I’ll be there, too. I’ll hold you and stay up all night with you if you can’t sleep. I’ll try to make you laugh when you need it and cry with you if that’s what’s going to help. I’ll hold your hand and shower you with love. I’ll lie with you on the ground in days where you can stand and I’ll help you get back on your feet after a while. I’ll sing your favorite songs to you and run my hands through your hair. I’ll hug you and kiss you anytime you want me to. But for that you’ll have to stay. Please, give me the chance to show you that life’s worth living, no matter all the shit that’s in the world. Give me the chance to make you the happiest man alive. Please, stay. Stay *with me*”

By the time El stopped speaking, they were already crying again. El was sure she would keep her promises and Mike didn’t doubt that. Her words had made his heart grow with love and adoration for the girl who was holding him, imagining a future where everything El had said was true. However, he still couldn’t fully commit to everything that life brought. Not wanting to disappoint her, he slowly backed away from her embrace and looked at her

“A love story?” he asked, trying to avoid the topic of deciding and wiping his tears

“What?” El asked, confused

“You said a love story wasn’t going to save me. Is that what this is?”

El gave him a small smile, shaking her head in disbelief. “Really? That’s all you got from what I said?” she asked rhetorically. “Yes, dummy. I thought it was clear by now” she stated, moving some of his hair that had fallen to his forehead

She was disappointed that he hadn’t told her anything about what his choice would be. She didn’t want to pressure him, she knew this wasn’t a simple choice to make. However, he was running out of time. “Look, I’m going to take a shower now and I’ll leave you to think. I don’t want you to choose anything you don’t want to, but you also have to hurry. If you” she took a deep breath. “If you die, let it be your choice, not the world telling you your time’s up” she said, getting up from his lap.

He only nodded, considering her words. He looked so fragile and vulnerable sitting there on the ground, having clearly cried before. She wondered if she should kiss him just in case he wasn’t there when she came back, but she decided against it. Their first kiss had to be special, not rushed by fear. She turned on her heels and went to the bathroom, closing the door and stripping from her clothes. Once she took a look of herself in the mirror, she noticed she looked as vulnerable as the guy in her living room and she had to hold back her tears. Losing Mike was a possible thing to happen, and she would have to live with it. Life would go on. However, she wasn’t sure how she would do it. Mike had become her sun, and her days would surely be dark and cold without him.

In another room of the apartment, Mike lay on the floor where El had left him. He wasn’t sure if he would be able to make a decision, both options tempting but terrifying as hell. He knew he could have a great future if he wanted to with the support of his loved ones and the promise of a life with El. Death was a good option, though. He wouldn’t have to worry about anything and his bad days would instantly be gone. He wouldn’t have to either feel sad or feel nothing

because he wouldn't have the chance to *feel* anymore.

He didn't want to hurt his family and friends that way, though. He had been selfish enough to try to kill himself the first time, thinking he wouldn't have to deal with any consequences. Now he knew he couldn't have been more wrong. He remembered his family's tears when he saw them the first day at hospital. He knew his friends were devastated, too. El had told him about them, and what he found out wasn't nice at all, even though El had obviously spared him some details.

Oh fuck, El. The most beautiful woman in the world, perfect in every aspect. He didn't want to think how broken she would be if he died. This time with her had been spectacular and he had developed the strongest feelings he had ever felt for someone- and they were all because of her. He was sure he looked at her like she put the moon in its place every night and lit up the sun every morning, because to him, she did. She had given him back a sense of happiness he hadn't had since he was twelve, bringing light to the darkest places of his soul. Just imagining her crying after realizing he was gone made Mike sick in the stomach.

He couldn't do that to her. He couldn't do that to any of the people he cared about. If he couldn't continue living because of himself, he would at least do it for the people he loved. It's the less he could do after putting them through hell and back this last few weeks.

There, he did it. He decided. He would live for his family, he would live for his friends

He would live for *her*.

He waited for something to happen. Wasn't he supposed to go back once he had made his choice? Maybe things didn't work like that and he was worrying over nothing. Maybe he should give 'It' more time to act. He looked at the clock on El's coffee table and was shocked to see that it was already 8 pm. They had spent quite some time at Tom's and he had spent so much time in his head that he didn't notice time passing by. He then realized that there wasn't any sound of water, so El must have already gotten out of the shower. Not wanting to spend more time without her, he got up from the floor

and walked with determination to El's bedroom.

El had just gotten out of the shower after having spent a pretty decent amount of time in there. Hot water helped her relax and clear her mind, so she took advantage of it. She had just put on her pajamas when she heard steps going from the living room to her bedroom. She turned to her door, waiting for Mike, confusion taking over her when she saw him stop at her doorway to look at her. She saw his gaze soften but also fill with something she had never seen before, something *new*. She came closer to him, raising her eyebrows

“Hey, you can come in if you want to, I don’t-“ she couldn’t finish her sentence because she was cut off by a pair of lips slamming on hers. It took her a second to figure out what was happening. *Mike was kissing her*. His hands were on both sides of her face, fingers tangling in her hair and she felt herself melt. All her worries went away and so did the rest of the world, the only important thing in that moment being their joined lips. She kissed him back as eagerly and hungrily as he was and she knew her lips were meant to be on his forever. She had kissed some guys at college but nothing could be compared to what she felt while kissing Mike. She was both excited and calm, the sensation new but also strangely familiar. She felt at home and as she tugged him by his neck and pulled him closer to her, she knew she didn’t ever want to kiss another pair of lips that weren’t Mike’s.

Mike moved his hands to her waist and pushed her impossibly close to him, not knowing where his body ended and hers began but not caring at all. He caressed her bottom lip with his tongue, asking her for entrance, which she gladly accepted. Standing there, bodies intertwined and mouths joined together, Mike felt like flying. Fireworks seemed to be exploding in his chest and he was sure his heartbeat could be heard from miles away. He had wanted to kiss her since the first moment he saw her, and now that he had tasted her lips he never wanted to stop. It was better than he could have ever imagined. Her lips were like water and he was a man dying of dehydration. She was soft and warm and made him feel fuzzy inside, and he wasn’t sure how he was ever going to be able to separate his lips from hers. However, he was running out of air and he could tell El was too, so pecking her lips a couple times, he broke the kiss. He didn’t let go of her, though, only moving his head ever-so-slightly so

that he could look into her eyes, which were completely glazed over and were giving him a dreamy look.

Mike smiled and joined their foreheads together. “Woah” he spoke, panting. “If this feels that good without me being actually here, just imagine how it will feel like when we kiss with me being back”

It took it some time for El to process Mike’s words, being too lightheaded from their previous kiss to understand anything. When she caught up on what he had said, she grinned from ear to ear. “*When?* You decided?” she asked excitedly

“Yeah. I want to be able to be with the people I love, I don’t want to make them suffer any more than they have. I want to hug my family and laugh with my friends and kiss” *peck* “you” *peck* “senseless” *another peck*. “Now that I have kissed you once, I’m never gonna stop” he told a giggling El. “Besides, how I’m I gonna tell everyone I can that you’re my girlfriend if I’m dead?”

“Girlfriend? Do you- do you want me to be your girlfriend? Weren’t you the one who didn’t believe in the ‘g-word’?” asked El in disbelief. She loved how that sounded coming from Mike’s mouth, and she liked it even more because she was referring to her

“You changed that, El. You changed the way I see love and relationships. Of course I want you to be my girlfriend. You’re gorgeous and kind and funny and the most perfect woman I have ever met. How could I not?” he told her, caressing her jaw with his thumb. “So, what do you say? Do you take me as your boyfriend?”

Instead of an answer, Mike got another kiss from El, this time her being the one who started it. It was messy and sloppy because of the huge smiles on both their faces, but it was also perfect because it was *theirs*. Neither of them could believe their luck. They had found each other against all odds and were going to fight whatever life threw at them together. Everything between them felt natural and meant to be, because it was.

El broke the kiss that time, realizing that something was wrong. “Hey, if you decided to live, why aren’t you back again?” she asked him, worry filling her body

"I have no idea, I guess it takes time" Mike shrugged. "Relax, El. I've made my decision and according to Tom that's enough. Everything will happen eventually" he told her, rubbing their noses together

"Yeah, you're right" she said, pecking his lips. "Why don't we cook something while we wait? I haven't eaten in forever and I'm starving"

The rest of their night was spent with laughs, food and a few (*well, maybe a lot of*) kisses. Mike was the one who initiated most of them, arguing that El had promised to kiss him whenever he wanted if he stayed and he just happened to want it *all the time*. They tried to leave their worries behind, deciding to deal with everything later. There was nothing else they could do, and worrying their heads off wasn't going to do any help. They deserved to spend their first moments as a couple in peace.

Once it got late, they were both exhausted, their rollercoaster of emotions having drained them from all energy. When they decided to go to sleep, El laughed as she saw Mike making her way to the couch

"What are you doing, silly? What kind of girlfriend would I be if I let you sleep on the sofa? Come here" she told him, tugging him by his waist to her bedroom.

They lay in bed together like they had the previous night, El laying her head on Mike's chest and him wrapping his arms protectively around his girlfriend. *He loved to call her that and he couldn't wait to brag about her with the whole world once he was back in his body.*

"This is crazy" El spoke, looking up at him "Being here, with you, having our future ahead of us. I hate what happened to you, but I love that it brought us together"

Mike smiled down at her, kissing her temple. "Yeah, me too. Meeting you changed my life, El. You changed my life. Thank you" he told her, leaning in for a kiss when he finished

Their kiss was sweet and short, unlike most of the previous ones they had shared. Some minutes later, they had both fallen peacefully asleep, cuddled and wrapped up in each other. Their lovely moment didn't last long.

Some hours later, El woke up as Mike suddenly sat up, sending her flying to the matters below them. He was paralyzed for a second, and then the screaming started. He looked as if he was in complete agony, his hands roaming through his body trying to somehow soothe the pain he was feeling

“Mike? Mike?!” El shouted, fear even in her bones. This episode was lasting way longer than the previous one and seemed to be a million times more intense

Mike couldn’t get his words out, feeling like he was choking and burning and had every bone in his body broken. He didn’t understand *why* it was happening to him, but he definitely knew what it was. He tried warning El, who was looking at him with tears in her eyes, but he couldn’t speak. With all the effort in the world, he managed to croak two words through the pain. “I-I’m d-dyi-in-g”.

El didn’t know what to do, desperation in every cell of her body. “No! Fuck, no!” she cried out

“G-go” Mike managed to say, and he didn’t have to say where. El already knew.

She didn’t want to leave him alone like that, but his real body was at hospital. *The body that was giving up*. She stood up, grabbed her coat and giving one last glance to Mike, she put it on and left her apartment, not even changing her pajamas for some clothes. Luckily, she still had Hopper’s car and she would be able to be in the hospital in no time.

She wasn’t there to see when Mike’s pain stopped, not because he was fine, but because he was unconscious. *Gone*.

She wasn’t there when he closed his eyes, breathing deeply.

She wasn’t there when he disappeared.

Notes for the Chapter:

...i'm sorry

10. We're just beginning to understand the miracle of living (baby, I was afraid before, but I'm not afraid anymore)

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello loves! Your feedback to last chapter was out of this world. You seriously make me the happiest.

I cried while writing this and I had to take a small break because it's just so full of emotions it's insane. I hope you cry like I did haha. Enjoy!

El miraculously arrived to the hospital in one piece. Even though her apartment was only a few blocks away, she almost crashed her car three times because of the fear and the blurry vision tears gave her. She didn't understand what was going on with Mike. He had decided he wanted to live and some hours later he was about to die again. They had been so *happy* those few hours together as a couple, and El couldn't wait to see what the future was going to bring them. However, that future was seemingly being taken away from them and El wanted nothing else than to scream and punch whatever or whoever was responsible for that. Maybe Tom was wrong with what he had said; maybe wanting to live wasn't enough. But now, as El basically ran out of the car and entered the hospital, she hoped it was.

She took the elevator to the floor she knew so well because of her constant visits, and like many times prior, she was met by the secretary. This time was different than other times, though. She knew visiting times were over and that she wasn't going to be welcomed there, but nothing was going to stop her from being with Mike. As she was approaching the secretary's desk, she spoke

"Hi, miss. Are you related to a patient here?" the secretary asked

"I'm Michael Wheeler's girlfriend and I need to see him" El explained

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid you can't be here. Visiting times are over. Only close family members get to be here this late. " she told El. By the

way she looked her up and down and then rolled her eyes, El knew she wouldn't give in easily

"Please, can you make an exception? I *really* need to go in there, it's urgent" El pleaded her

"I said visiting times are over, there's no way I can let you stay. You can come back tomorrow if you want" the secretary told El, voice tinted with annoyance

Seeing that she wasn't going to change her mind, El left her politeness behind. There was no way in hell she was going to leave. "Listen, I don't care if I have to physically fight you to be here, Mike needs me and-"

"El?" she heard a weak voice that came from behind her. El turned around and saw that the voice came from no other than Karen Wheeler.

She looked terrible, her hair was all over the place, her lips were hurt from anxiously biting them but what caught El's attention were her eyes. They were swollen and bloodshot from crying, fresh tears threatening to make their way out. El could tell something had happened. If this was another ordinary night, Karen would be fast asleep in the couch in Mike's room.

She walked the few steps that separated her from the woman and engulfed her in a tight hug. Karen broke down crying at El's actions and only some seconds passed before El was crying, too.

Breaking their embrace, Karen cleaned her face and looked at the secretary. "I'm Michael's mother. El is welcomed to stay here, my son needs her more than ever" she told her, voice firm and determined.

Mumbling a 'whatever' and gesturing towards an aisle, the secretary gave in. El gave Karen a small smile to thank her, but she was sure it didn't reach her eyes. Walking towards Mike's room, Karen looked at her and spoke

"Oh, honey, I'm so glad you're here. Ted is coming with Nancy and Holly, too. I don't think I can do this alone" she told El, grabbing her

hand and giving it a squeeze

“What happened? Is Mike okay?” El asked, voice breaking at the end of the sentence

“His heart started failing some minutes ago. I was with him, sleeping in his room, and the sound of the heart monitoring machine going crazy woke me up. His heart rate was the fastest I had ever seen, and then it” Karen’s voice broke, and El tightened her grip on her hand. “Then it suddenly slowed down to the point of almost stopping. I called the doctors and they rushed me out of the room. They got to stabilize Mike, but they told me this night is critical. They don’t think he’ll make it. He’s been in a coma for way too long and his heart is having more and more trouble every time” she finished, a tear running down her face

El’s heart clenched with fear. Mike couldn’t die. She wouldn’t be able to cope with it. “How is he doing now?” she asked in a small voice

“He’s stable for now. We’ll have to wait and pray. Having you here will do him good, I’m sure of that. How did you know you had to come?” Karen asked

El couldn’t tell her her son had been with her when all of this happened. Even though she didn’t like it, she knew she had to lie. “I woke up with this feeling... I guess I would call it intuition. As soon as I was up, I knew something was wrong. I knew I had to come here”

Karen smiled and reached out to caress El’s arm, letting go of her hand. “Thank you for caring so much about my son. He’s been having a rough few years and it’s nice to see he has someone like you in his life” she said, while seating down in one of the waiting room chair’s in front of Mike’s room.

El did the same, taking up the sit next to Karen. She smiled gratefully to the woman. She wanted to tell her that she didn’t have to thank her, that her son was all El wanted and that seeing him smile was the only thing she wanted in return for helping him. She didn’t, though. El didn’t want Karen to find out about her and Mike’s relationship in this context. She’d rather tell her the good news once everything was

alright again. What worried El now is that she didn't know how to make things right. What Tom had said didn't work and she was running out of hope, patience and, most importantly, time.

Some minutes after El had arrived, the rest of Mike's family did, too. They all had terrified expressions and bloodshot eyes. El tightly hugged Nancy, who she had become close to, and greeted both Ted and Holly with shorter hugs. It was nice to see familiar faces in this scary moment, they made her feel like she didn't have to go through this alone. The three of them sat next to El and Karen, and after having asked how Mike was doing, they began talking.

Their talk led to the topic of Mike's depression, and El found out lots of things about how his life had been. Karen told her how Mike had been depressed since he was twelve, always sporting a sad face no matter the situation, not speaking and not wanting to leave his room. El listened carefully with tears in her eyes.

"I was the one who found him in the tub the day he tried to kill himself" Nancy told El at one point. "I was at my parent's house with Steve and John for dinner. I saw him go to the bathroom and didn't think much of it, but I needed to go, too, and he wouldn't come out. I told him to hurry up and instead of hearing a snappy, sarcastic comeback I was welcomed by silence. It was really strange for him not to use the chance to start a fight, so I knocked on the door and asked him if he was okay. I still had no answer, so I went in." she paused, trying not to cry at the memory of her brother in that situation. "There was so much blood on the floor, on the walls, inside the bathtub. I tried to wake him up but he had passed out from blood loss. I never thought I would have to see my baby brother like that, I didn't think it was that serious. I wish I could have done something before he got to that point."

"Don't beat yourself up, Nance" Ted told her, grabbing her hand. "I was the shittiest dad in the world from the day he was born. I should have been there for him. I should have been a better dad and a better husband. I'm sorry I had to be about to lose one of you to realize how stupid I was" he finished, looking at his daughters and his wife, who were crying as much as he was

Their talk was interrupted when the nurse who was staying in Mike's

room came running out, screaming for help. The five of them stood up to try and see what was going on, when they saw a bunch of doctors running straight to the room. Doctor Owens was among them, carrying a defibrillator. That image and the beeping sound coming from inside the room was all the information they needed. Mike was flatlining. He was dying right in front of their eyes.

El saw everything in a blur. She barely heard Karen screaming or Holly sobbing, too shocked and scared to notice the world around her. She was sure she was crying, too, but she couldn't know for sure. All her mind could process was that the boy who she had fallen in love with was about to die. She didn't notice that she had been slowly walking to the room until she felt a pair of skinny arms going around her, stopping her from going closer. That gesture brought her back to reality and there, in Nancy's arms, she broke down. Her legs failed to keep her standing, and she would've fallen to her knees if Nancy hadn't been holding her. She didn't care, though. She didn't care that she was full on sobbing. She didn't care that all the Wheelers were seeing her in such a vulnerable state. She didn't care about her or anyone there for that matter. All she could think about were freckles and pale skin and soft lips against hers and deep, dark eyes that had her gasping for air every time she looked at them. *Please, let him be okay.*

Mike woke up in a dark room, dazed and confused. He had felt himself drifting out of consciousness and had thought that those were his final moments. He didn't think he would wake up later, surrounded by darkness. He stood up from where he was lying and noticed that the floor was covered in water, even though he wasn't wet. Everything was pitch black and cold. He turned around, trying to comprehend what was happening, and he saw a bright light in the distance.

He approached the light slowly and, as he got, closer, he could make out that it wasn't just a light. It was a waiting room. More specifically, it was the waiting room outside his hospital room. There were people running into his room and some others just standing there, someone being held by what seemed like... Nancy?

Then he realized, the people there were his family, and they were crying.

His mother was standing in front of the room's door, sobbing hysterically, while hugging both his father and Holly. Mike wasn't sure if she was doing it to console them or to keep her from falling to the ground. Holly was crying while holding Karen and Ted, her hand in fists, gripping both his mother and his father's shirt. Ted had his arms around Karen and Holly in a protective way, burying his face in Karen's hair. Mike had never seen their parents so close to each other, but that wasn't the weirdest thing. What he couldn't believe was the way his father was crying. He looked utterly devastated, his chest shaking with each sob that came out of his mouth.

Next to them, Nancy was almost crouching on the floor, holding someone by their waist. She was crying like the rest of her family, face contorted with fear and *pain*. His heart broke a little at the sight of his family. They were annoying, they fought all the time and they had had thousands of bad moments, but they were the people that loved him the most. However, his heart completely shattered when he looked down at the person his sister was holding. There, lying helpless on the floor was the girl whose smile could brighten up his day, the girl he had the pleasure to call his girlfriend since some hours ago.

Mike crouched in front of El, which helped him see her face. She was sobbing, holding her chest in her hands as if it would break if she let it go. She had a mixture of devastation and sheer terror on her face, and he wanted nothing more to comfort her and tell her that everything would be okay. *Would it be okay, though?*

None of them seemed to notice his presence, not even El, so he reached to caress his girlfriend's face in an attempt to get her to know he was there, with her. However, right when he touched her, she disappeared into thin air and so did his family. They were replaced by the image of doctors screaming and running frantically, hovering over some patient who seemed to be in critical condition. When he got a better look, he could see that the patient was no other than himself. Doctor Owens was trying to reanimate him and get his heart to beat again, and he understood what was going on. He was watching himself die.

Without needing to be touched, the image of him disappeared too, leaving him alone again in this black place.

“This must be where souls go after they die” he thought out loud

“No, Michael, it isn’t” he heard a voice next to him. He turned, scared, to find Tom standing there

“Tom? How did you get here?” Mike asked, relieved to see someone there with him

“I’m not completely here, this is not my real form. Your soul was in trouble and it called me to help you. Consider me your spiritual guide” Tom replied, voice calm and reassuring

“Where am I? What is this place?”

“This, my friend, is called The Void. This is a place where souls come when they are between life and death. And that’s what happening to you, Mike” Tom explained

“You said that I could go back one I decided I wanted to live and I did! You lied!” Mike screamed, suddenly angry. “You liar! You stupid, disgusting piece of shit! Liar! Liar!” he continued, punching Tom repeatedly on his chest. Tom grabbed his wrists with ease and brought Mike to his chest, hugging him. Mike let himself cry and be held, he needed it after everything he had seen.

“I didn’t lie, like you didn’t decide, either” Tom said, letting go of Mike to look at him in the eyes. “When I said you had to decide, I meant that you had to decide for yourself. You chose to live because of what other people may think or feel, but what do *you* want? Deciding to live in order not to hurt anybody isn’t choosing for yourself, it isn’t committing to live. If everybody left you, would you still want to live? You still have the choice, and while I’m glad you don’t want to hurt my El, you have to make a decision regardless what your loved ones may think of it. Choose life because you want to, not because you have to” said Tom, wisely

Mike thought about his words. He was right. He had chosen life because he didn’t want to hurt the people he loved, not because he wanted to do so. He never thought of himself, always putting everybody else first, and now things didn’t seem to work like that.

“Think and choose wisely, Mike, before your time runs up” Tom said. After his words, he disappeared like everyone before him. Now, surrounded by nothing but blackness, he knew he had to make his choice.

He sat on the floor, listening to the silence in the room. He closed his eyes for a second, trying to get a grip on everything that was happening. When he opened his eyes, he could see a memory of himself playing with Nancy in his backyard when he was little projecting in the distance. Confused, he got up and got closer to the projection. The image was floating in the air as if it was being shown in an invisible screen.

The memory changed to one where his first tooth came out and how excited his mother had been. He laughed at his younger self's toothless grin, and he watched in awe as the image changed to the memory of him riding his bike all by himself for the first time. All of them were happy memories which made him feel warm inside. His first school day, when he met all of his best friends. The day when he bought his favorite childhood toy, Rory, a dinosaur that roared when he pressed a button. The day Holly was born. D&D campaigns with the boys. Being with El, kissing her and holding her, as she told him without words that she was more than happy to be his girlfriend. El, who had been there for him since day one. El, who helped him get better when he was feeling down. El, who was so beautiful it hurt. El, who didn't judge him and gave him all her love.

Suddenly, the memories changed to some not so happy ones. The day he had been diagnosed with depression. The day his grandma died. The day his father screamed at him for no apparent reason, causing him to argue with Karen and storm out of the house, coming back the following day. The day he had his first encounter with Troy, the kid who bullied him and his friends all through primary, middle and high school. The day his first pet, Goldie the gold fish, had died. When he had argued with El. When he had tried to kill himself, razor sharp and cold tearing up his skin.

He was on a rollercoaster of emotions and he didn't know how to get down. Life had been so great but so bad at the same time that he didn't know how he should feel. Some other memories screened in front of him. When Will's father had abandoned him and Mike was

there for him, comforting him at first and then having a fun sleepover. When he had failed an important exam and came home crying, but then having his mother to comfort him, making him his favorite dish. When he was lost in the streets after waking up and realizing he was in a coma, only for El to find him later and welcome him to her life.

They were bittersweet moments, sadness followed by happiness in the span of some minutes. Life was like that, he realized. It gave and it took, in all its twisted but beautiful glory. He would never be happy forever, but he wouldn't always be sad, either. He still had some of the best and worst days of his life yet to live, a whole future of magic and tragic moments waiting for him.

Was he going to be able to go through the sadness and despair to see the better days? Would he be able to hold on? He thought about how miserable his last years had been, but how happy he was during his first years of life (and, to be honest, these last two weeks). He had to be strong and overcome his mental illness, but he didn't know if it was possible. He would probably have to live with his dark demons all his life, but he knew that with help and patience he was going to be able to make them go quiet. It was only a matter of time.

He was standing in a thin line between life and death, he just had to give one step and he would be finally on only one side. He was fighting a battle against his worst enemy: himself. But he wasn't alone, though. He had his allies. And he had been losing, but the match was far from over if he wanted to continue playing. He only had to make the choice.

Some hours had passed and El was still awake but exhausted, sitting in the same chair from before. It was almost Sunday morning, which meant that Mike's friends were going to be able to come visit him. Karen had called all of the party members and Nancy had left both Steve and John worrying at their house. The doctors had stabilized him after some minutes of hard work, and El almost got up and hugged Doctor Owens right when she found out that Mike had been saved. He still was in a critical state, but at least his heart was beating.

Having had some time to relax a little, the whole Wheeler family fell

asleep when Mike was out of imminent danger. Sleep sounded like a good idea, so El rested her head on Holly's shoulder and drifted to sleep.

She was woken up some time later when she heard frantic voices coming near her. She woke up, confused, only to see Steve, Jonathan, Will, Lucas, Dustin and Max walking to where she and Mike's family were. Everyone had woken up at this point, and Nancy threw herself at her boyfriends' arms, engulfing them in a group hug.

El ran straight to Max, who hugged her tightly. "Oh my god, El. How are you?" she asked, concerned about her best friend's well being

"Tired and scared, but I'm happy the doctors could help Mike. I- I thought he would die, Max. I almost died right there with him" El told her redhead friend honestly

"I know, love, I know. We were all so worried at home. Will and Dustin came over until we could come here. The guys were devastated." Max replied, stroking El's hair

After they let go, El greeted the guys, hugging them too. They had become friends in the span of these two weeks, the hard situation bringing them closer than normal. They all sat down together, El and the Wheelers explaining everything that had happened the night before to the rest. Tears were shed and some more hugs were given. They were like a big family, after all, and comforting each other was everything they could do to make this moment lighter.

"The doctors told us we have to wait. Mike could be in a coma for years before he wakes up, but the biggest problem right now is his heart. They don't know why it's failing like it is, but if it happens again there are less chances for him to be saved" Karen explained, her hand in her husband's. They had never been the most loving couple, with Ted acting like a douche, but now that he had owned up to his mistakes she was willing to try and give him a real second chance. After all, they needed each other in that moment.

Steve left with Nancy, Jonathan and Mike's friends to get something in the cafeteria for everyone to eat. Hospital food was disgusting, but they were starving, recovering their appetite once they found out

Mike was better than some hours ago.

El refused to move from where she was seated in spite of Max almost dragging her with them. She wasn't going to leave Mike, not now nor ever. She wanted to be there if he woke up, and she wanted to be there if he died. She didn't know it yet, but she had made the right decision.

She was beginning to fall asleep again when she heard a commotion coming from Mike's room. Now two nurses had stayed with him through the night, and El could swear she was having a dejavu. A nurse came running out of the room and went to find some doctors, who came running back in the room. Ted, Holly, Karen and El feared for the worst, but when Doctor Owens came out of the room sporting the widest smile in the world and said the phrase they were all waiting for since the first day, El was in tears for a very different reason than last night.

"He's awake, family. He made it"

They all started crying from relief, a weight lifting off El's chest. He made it, he made it, he made it repeating in her brain, and she was sure it was her favorite sentence from then on. The promise of a future with him was more real than ever and El felt her knees go weak. She knew that life with her soulmate was going to be great, and she couldn't wait to experience it together.

"He's still a little confused, but you may go in to see him if you please" Doctor Owens said with a soft smile.

Karen, Ted and Holly looked at El, and she motioned them to go first. As much as she wanted to see him, they were his family and they deserved it.

El did what she had been about to do before: he went to the man and gave him a hug. Owens was surprised at first, but then hugged the girl back.

"Thank you" El said. "Thank you for saving Mike's life and my own a while ago"

Owens then recognized the girl. "I'm glad I got to save you both. You seem to be great kids"

El let go of the man but she didn't sit back down. She paced in front of the room, too excited and nervous to stop moving. After some minutes, the door opened and Karen, Ted and Holly came out. The three were crying happy tears and wearing matching smiles. El had never seen them happy and together as a family, and it was a sight that warmed her insides.

"Go, honey." Karen told El. "The first thing he did was ask for you."

El nodded, tears already in her eyes. She turned the doorknob and opened the door, entering the room. It was still the same room she had seen before, but something in the air had changed. Something was much, much better.

She walked inside slowly, lifting her gaze to find another pair of eyes staring back at her with tears, relief and so much love that it almost made her faint. A sob escaped her throat without her permission as she ran and threw herself into Mike's waiting arms. As Mike was sitting, she ended up climbing to his lap.

They didn't get to hug completely, their lips finding a way together before either of them could process what they were doing. The kiss was hungry and filled with happiness, both of them tasting the salt of their combined tears. Mike grabbed El with one hand on her neck and the other one in the small of her back, bringing her close. El, in contrast, couldn't decide where to leave her hands, roaming through his hair, arms, chest, back as if she couldn't believe he was real (because she just *couldn't*). Their first kiss had been magical, there's no denying it, but this one was a thousand times better.

It was a promise of a life together, without anything threatening to take away one of them.

It was an ending to one story and a beginning to a similar one, but this one with less worries and secrets, replacing them with happiness and love instead.

Both their hearts were beating like crazy, almost as if they wanted to

break free from their respective bodies. They kissed and kissed and kissed until they were no longer crying and their lips hurt. As they separated, joining their foreheads together and smiling in bliss, El couldn't stop the words from falling from her mouth.

"I love you, I love you so much. Never scare me like that again. I can't lose you." she told him, breath fanning over his lips. She was worried for a second that she had said those three words too early, but when she saw Mike's smile expanding, she knew she had nothing to worry about. They were soulmates, after all, and they shared a connection that even most married couples would never achieve. It didn't matter how little time they had spent together, she was sure of how she felt and, having been so close to never being able to tell him, she didn't want to waste no more time.

"God, I love you so fucking much" Mike replied, watching as El smiled dreamily at him. "You won't lose me" he told her, caressing her jaw with his thumb

"Do you promise?" El asked, fear taking over her for a second

"Promise" Mike assured her, and El believed him. How could she not when he was looking at her so passionately she could melt?

And just like that, they were kissing again, their mouths fitting against the other perfectly. Neither of them would get tired of kissing the other, that was for sure. The kiss was full of love and mutual adoration, happiness making them giddy and fuzzy inside. This was going to be everlasting and they just *knew* it.

They would have kept on kissing if it wasn't for the door opening. When they let go of each other, they were mortified to see that Mike's whole family and all of their friends were standing there. Some of them were smirking, some of them were visibly shocked and some of them were crying.

El stood up shyly from Mike's lap, him letting a tiny whining sound that made everybody laugh. What? They had been so close to losing each other that Mike didn't want El to be in other space that wasn't near (or *on*) him.

Everyone who hadn't seen Mike before launched themselves at him, Nancy being the first one to hug him and then slap him in his head. "If you try to do that one more time, I'll kill you" she said, earning a watery laugh from Mike who was crying, overwhelmed by that much love he was receiving. Then, all his friends hugged him one by one, crying and laughing and crying once more.

El approached Karen, who hugged her tightly. "Welcome to the family" she told El

Once they had let go of each other, both Nancy and Holly gave her a hug at the same time, telling her how glad they were that their brother had found someone like her and welcoming her to the family, too. Then, Ted surprisingly hugged her too, joking about how he never thought Mike would find someone as pretty as her, which earned him a good-natured slap in his arm from Karen, who was watching the scene and smiling.

After everybody had hugged Mike, he motioned for El to go over the bed with him. El sat in the corner, which made Mike protest and bring her closer to him, making her lie back with her back on his chest, her head under his chin. He pressed a kiss to the side of her head and they both looked at each other, smiling. They were there and this was real and they were *together*.

"How'd you get to come back?" El asked, whispering

"Tom. I'll explain later" Mike told whispered back, pecking her lips. El made a mental note to thank her uncle later.

The rest of the people in the room awed seeing the loving couple, their devotion for the other tangible in the air around them.

"So" Will suddenly spoke, "you owe me thirty dollars, Dustin"

"What? Why?" Mike asked

"I told him that El and you were together and he told me there was no way you could score a girl like her, so we made a bet" he said, grinning

Dustin got his wallet out, giving a laughing Mike an apologetic look

and reluctantly handing Will three ten dollar bills. Everyone laughed at the situation, the tension leaving their bodies completely. Mike and El looked at each other and there were no words needed for what they were feeling. Their bond went beyond words. They just knew. They met in a brief kiss that made their stomachs do flip flops and their hearts race, like every time they kissed.

There, surrounded by all their friends and Mike's family, was where everything fell into place.

Together, side by side, they would deal with everything life threw at them. Together, they would spend their lives surrounded by these amazing people. Together, they would cry and laugh. Together, they would share the sweetest, most genuine love to ever exist on earth.

Forever.

Til death did them part.

Notes for the Chapter:

I love you all so much, thanks for all the support. I'd love to hear what you think about this chapter. We'll meet again for the epilogue aka last chapter of this story :)

rip goldie the goldfish

11. If you're ready like I'm ready

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi there, loves. We have reached our final destination. I'm so happy to have been able to write for you guys, your feedback (especially in the two previous chapters) has been amazing. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't sit on my bed and smiled like a fool while reading every single comment you left. Thank you so much for supporting my little writing experience :)

Two years later

El woke up to the sound of her alarm. Groaning, she tried to stretch her arm to grab her phone and turn it off but she was stopped by two strong arms wrapped around her small frame. She smiled, detangling herself from her sleeping boyfriend and grabbing her phone from her nightstand. What had begun like a normal Saturday morning suddenly turned into a different one when she saw the name of the alarm she had set.

Wake up, dumbhead, your father's getting married today

She had completely forgotten the day her whole family had been waiting for had arrived. Hopper had proposed to Joyce about a year ago with the help of El, Will and Jonathan. They had all met officially some months before that and they already felt like a family. He had decorated every corner of his house, fairy lights and rose petals had been carefully arranged by his daughter and Joyce's sons while Joyce was at work. El had also taken care of the food: she had asked her former boss, Benny, to cook a delicious meal for the two. She didn't want her father ruining good quality food with his lack of cooking skills. In the end, everything turned out exactly as it had been planned, and the evening finished with the tearful couple exchanging a romantic kiss after the ring had been put on Joyce's finger. *Who knew Hop could be such a helpless romantic?*

Smiling because of the memory and the excitement for the wedding,

El got up from the bed which caused Mike to make a whining sound in his sleep, upset about losing El's body heat. She looked at him with adoration written all over her face. She sometimes couldn't believe how lucky she had been to be able to have Mike as her boyfriend. She would *never* be able to forget how terrifying being close to lose him had felt, and she never wanted to go through that again.

It wasn't like she thought she would have to. Mike had been going to therapy almost every day of the week for the last two years, finally finding a therapist who he felt comfortable with. When El started working as a psychologist in Hawkins Mental Institute she met Martha, a middle aged woman who she instantly got on well with. She knew having Mike be her patient would help him, as she was so kindhearted and experienced, and fortunately she wasn't wrong. The therapy had done him so well that he didn't even have to take pills anymore.

Mike obviously had his bad days, though. It's not like there's a permanent cure for depression. However, he had learnt how to ask for help, so when something wasn't right he would talk to his parents, his sisters or his friends to lessen the burden of a difficult day. Everyone around him was willing to help as much as they could, even Ted, who had changed drastically in this last period of time. As soon as Mike left the hospital, they had a heartfelt conversation where his father apologized to him for being a shitty dad, and it all went uphill from there. Even Karen and Ted's relationship had improved, and now they looked like an actual couple.

Of course El would always help him, too. She had kept her promise of trying to make him the happiest man on earth and Mike was forever grateful for that. She knew him better than anybody else, being able to read him like an open book. She knew just what to say or do to make him feel better when life became just a little too much. She would stay with him when he needed and spend countless nights at his house when he couldn't sleep.

Mike helped El at night, too, stopping her nightmares from happening when they slept together. On the rare occasions when El still had nightmares even sleeping cuddled with Mike, he would hold her and tell her that everything would be okay and she would easily drift back to sleep. The nights when she didn't have him around were

difficult, though. That was until they moved in together.

El ran her hands through Mike's hair lovingly, giving him five more minutes of sleep before she woke him up, remembering how that night, seven months ago, he had asked her to move in with him.

They were lying on El's bed in her apartment, the same apartment they had shared the first two weeks upon meeting each other. They were naked and breathless, wrapped up around each other with the bedsheets barely covering them after having made love for hours on end. Those moments were precious, when they just came out of their highs and they just looked at each other dazedly, committing their partner's bare body to memory.

*El had her head on Mike's chest, a dreamy smile adorning her delicate features, and Mike felt his heart burst from the amount of love he had for the girl with messy sex hair and sweaty forehead who was staring up at him. Now was the moment he had been planning for weeks. He had planned to tell her as soon as they arrived to her apartment after leaving the restaurant they had had dinner at, but she just looked **so fucking good** and she had kissed him with all she had and well...*

"Hey El, I was thinking..."

"Yes?" she asked with a yawn

"Wouldyouliketomoveinwithme?" Mike said, speaking so fast that none of his words were understandable

"What?" El asked, laughing at her boyfriend's nervousness

*"Would you- would you like to move in with me?" he asked, clearer this time. "I've been meaning to move out of my parent's house for quite some time. My new job at the company made me have enough money to buy an apartment, and now that you left Benny's and have a better job we could afford something nice, and you don't like this apartment, and I'd **love** to be with you all the time and cuddle you to sleep every night and oh god I'm rambling and you probably won't want to-"*

He was cut off by El's lips pressing on his own, and just when she let go of him he could see the biggest smile on her face. "Of course I'd like to move in with you, Mike. That's all I could ever want"

Mike was the one to kiss her now, mirroring the smile on her face. This kiss, however, wasn't as short and simple as the previous one. Every kiss got his heart racing and his mind becoming foggy, but this particular kind, hungry and fervent, were his favorites.

Let's just say they didn't sleep much the following hours of that night.

El sighed dreamily at the memory, snapping out of her trance as she remembered why she had woken up at the first place. She wasn't aware that tonight, when Joyce and Hopper had already been married and they were celebrating with their loved ones, he'd pop the next big question. She didn't have to know, though. Not for now.

Moving her hand from Mike's hair to his shoulder, she shook him slightly

"Mike, love, we have to get up. Dad's getting married today" she told him, getting close to his face to peck his lips.

She felt his smile on her mouth as two hands got a hold of her waist and threw her back to bed. Mike rolled so that El was underneath his body, and he started pressing quick kisses to her forehead, nose, chin, neck, cheeks, lips and everywhere he could.

"Good morning, gorgeous" he told a giggling El. *God, that has to be the most incredible sound in the world*, he thought, staring down at her lovingly

"Good morning, handsome" she said, moving her head up to catch Mike's lips. She knew she would never get tired of kissing him. "I'm sorry to break this moment, but we kinda have to get up now. Joyce is expecting me at dad's in an hour, and dad's coming here sometime soon."

Joyce and Hopper planned their wedding to be in the woods next to their house. They put up a big, white tent where the party would take place and they decorated the place where they were going to marry with flowers, fairy lights and wooden chairs. El had already been to their house the previous day and the whole place looked lovely. The girls would get ready at Jim and Joyce's, and the boys would do the same at El and Mike's apartment.

Joyce had chosen El as one of her bridesmaids. They had spent plenty of time together since they met and they loved each other as if they were biologically mother and daughter. Joyce was El's first good mother figure, and El was a refreshing change for Joyce's two male sons. She had also chosen Nancy, who was her daughter in law but who she loved like a daughter, and also Karen and Max. Joyce had a good relationship with Karen since Mike and Will became friends, and now that two of their kids were dating two of the other woman's, their friendship had grown. Max was chosen because she spent a crazy amount of time with El, and Joyce soon grew to love her as if she was El's sister. Holly was chosen to be the flower girl, being the youngest in the group.

Jim, on the other hand, had chosen Mike as one of his groomsmen. Being very protective of El caused him to be tough with the Wheeler boy, but Joyce assured him that he was great for his daughter. Also, after spending time with him during these two years, he had grown to like him (love him would be acceptable, too, but Jim *wasn't going to admit it*). He'd chosen Will and Steve, too. Will had become like his own son, and Jim couldn't help but wonder how he got such a wonderful family in such a short amount of time. John was like his son, too, but he'd be walking Joyce to the altar. Last but not least, he'd also chosen Tom. He had always been his best friend, and he knew he had helped El in some strange way when she went running to him for help. If he had taken care of his little girl, he deserved that and more.

Hurrying, El and Mike started getting ready. They ate a quick breakfast which consisted of coffee and frosted flakes (El argued you could never be too old for cereal) and they changed into something casual and comfortable, leaving their fancy suit and dress for later. Once they were all done, El realized she should've probably left five minutes ago if she wanted to arrive on time. Gathering everything she needed and walking to the door, she says goodbye to Mike, who was brushing his teeth in the bathroom. She was about to leave when a pair of arms sneaked around her waist and spun her so that she would be face to face with their owner.

Without saying a word, Mike leaned down and captured El's mouth in a breathtaking kiss. He wanted to pour all the love he had for her

in it, telling her without talking what he wanted her to know but couldn't tell her until that evening. El melted into him, kissing him back just as eagerly as he was. Their kisses never failed to make her forget about everything else in the world, making them the only important thing existing. Mike captured her bottom lip with his teeth and tugged on it, which made her release a little moan. *I was wrong*, Mike thought, feeling hot and bothered all the sudden. ***That*** *is definitely the most incredible sound in the world*. Before things could get more heated, he let go of El, opening his eyes to admire her in all her swollen red lips and blown pupils glory.

"Goodbye, baby. See you in a couple hours" he whispered, breath fanning over her lips.

It took El every single bit of willpower to let go of him and go out the door, but she knew she had to if she wanted to arrive as early as possible. The drive to her dad's was spent between memories of the kiss they shared and sappy love songs that could only describe the warmth she felt inside.

When she arrived, she was met by a chaos of women, screams and makeup. As soon as she went through the door, she was greeted by Karen

"Hi, honey! Come on in, we're starting to get ready" she told the young girl, giving her a quick hug and shoving her to the master bedroom.

There, lying on the bed, were all the bridesmaids dresses. They were pastel pink, spaghetti-strapped, floor-length, flowy and just *gorgeous*. They had a v-line neckline and an open back, as well as a leg split. It was sexy and flirty, but not too revealing. The look was completed with a flower headband, small and big white and pink flowers adorning it.

Also, there was Joyce dress, which was the prettiest wedding dress she had ever seen. It was white, also floor length, flowy and with a v-line neck. It had bigger straps and a see-through back, in addition to a sheer tulle panel at the front which was adorned with white, delicate sewn flowers. It was simple and feminine, perfect for Joyce.

The boys, on the other hand, had their tuxes lying round the apartment, their excitement almost tangible. They had arrived half an hour ago, but getting ready was much simpler for them, so they would do it later. In that moment, they were sharing some whiskey and talking about how they thought the evening would go.

“Are you nervous?” Steve asked Hopper

“I’m not going to lie, Harrington, I’m scared shitless. But I know Joyce will look beautiful and that everything will turn up just fine.” Jim told him

“Are *you* nervous, Mike? You look as if you were about to shit your pants” Will told him, partially joking. The truth is that he did, indeed, look as if he was about to puke. He was fidgeting with the little black velvet box in his hands since El left, and he couldn’t think of anything else that wasn’t the question he’d ask that night. Mike only nodded, not trusting his words

“Hey, kid, relax” Tom said. “You and El love each other, and it’s almost as if you were soulmates” he said, with a knowing smirk. “If you think she won’t say yes, you’re out of your mind”

“He’s right, Wheeler” Jim spoke, sighing. “As much as it pains me to admit this, El looks at you with more love that I’ve ever seen her have for anybody, including me. I wouldn’t have given you my blessing if I thought this wasn’t what she wanted” he finished, patting him on the back affectionately. Mike smiled at him gratefully.

He had asked Jim for his blessing some weeks ago, explaining his plan. He went to his house with the fear of getting killed, but he got a hug and teary eyes instead (and a few threats here and there, too). He was happy his *hopefully* soon to be father in law had such a good relationship with him.

“She’s our sister now, so be careful or we’ll have to let you know you’re screwing things up in a not so pretty way in spite of how much we love you” said John with a wink, and Will seconded him laughing while nodding

“I won’t ever hurt her” Mike said honestly. “I’d rather die than make

her suffer”

“Okay, Romeo, stop being so dramatic and go get dressed” Jim told him with a hint of gratitude in his sarcastic tone. He knew Mike was telling the truth, and he was happy knowing he couldn’t have asked for a better man to marry his daughter.

Getting ready took the girls a few hours, having to get dressed and put on make up while also preparing some last minute details. They stopped to have lunch at one point, but then they were back to business. Once they were all ready it was almost time for the wedding to begin, and they all watched awestruck how Joyce looked. She was always a beautiful woman, but in that moment she looked more gorgeous than ever. She looked radiant, as if she was glowing, and El’s heart grew ten times bigger at the sight of the woman who would marry her dad.

“Oh, Joyce, you look gorgeous” said a teary-eyed Karen, the rest of the girls nodding in agreement

“Thank you, girls. Thanks for being here with me today” Joyce told all of them

“Can I have a moment alone with Joyce?” El asked, not wanting to make the girls feel bad but also wanting privacy

“Of course, dear. We’ll be right outside” Karen told her, signaling the girls the way out.

Once they were alone, El got closer to Joyce and took both the woman’s hands in hers

“I’m going to try to be quick and avoid tears, I don’t want to ruin my make up” El said with a laugh. “I just want you to know that I’m so, so happy that you’re the one who’s marrying my dad. He’s a great guy and he deserves to have a great woman by his side, and that’s what you are. From day one you were this sweet, loving person who made me feel loved and welcomed to her little family of three. Will and John are amazing, they’re like the brothers I never got to have. And you” El told her, already shedding some tears and watching as Joyce did, too “you’re like the mother I always wanted. I’m glad the

three of you came to complete the little family my dad and I had” El took a deep breath before dropping the bomb. “I love you... mom. Can I call you that?”

By the shock on Joyce’s face she thought she had made the wrong decision. However, the woman wrapped her arms tightly around El, and all the fear she had had seconds ago disappeared. El loved Joyce’s hugs, always warm and motherly, and this was the best one she had received from her.

“Oh, sweetie. I love you so much. You’re like a daughter to me, Ellie, never doubt that. I love you as much as I love Will and John. We’re family now, and we’ll always be from now on. You’re welcomed to call me mom as long as you let me call you my daughter. I may not have given birth to you, but you have my heart” Joyce told her, squeezing her even more

They stayed embraced for some time, before they felt a knock on the door. “El, Joy, it’s time” said Nancy

Letting go and quickly fixing their make up, they went out of the room. They were met by a group of smiling girls and a handsome John waiting for his mother

“You look stunning, mom” he told Joyce, giving her a hug. “So,” he said, letting go and looking at the girls “you should go out now, girls. Holly, you’ll walk the aisle once every bridesmaid and groomsman had arrived to their positions, and then I’ll come out with mom. Go find your groomsmen, girls”

Nancy, Karen, El and Max left the house and went to the backyard, which was some meters away from the place in the woods where the ceremony was going to be held. The whole town was there and they could see it, everybody wanting to celebrate with the happy couple. Some seconds after they left the house, the groomsmen joined them, all of them complementing the looks of the others.

Mike’s heart almost dropped out of his chest when he saw El. *Holy shit, she looks glorious.* Her hair was loose and she had the prettiest headband around her forehead, and her dress... Fuck, it hugged her body in the best way possible, showing her curves and accentuating

the best parts of her body. His throat was suddenly dry and all he could think was how he wanted to kiss his hot and gorgeous girlfriend until his lips fell off. He stood there, looking at her like an idiot, mouth agape.

"Uh, Mike, your heart eyes are showing" Will teased

El had a similar reaction. The butterflies in her stomach didn't fail to show up when she saw him in his tux. It was simple, black pants, jacket and tie and white dress shirt, but it made him look like the most handsome man in the world (*which, to El, he was*). His hair was his usual mop of curls, but it was styled in a way that framed his face perfectly. She thought she would start drooling if she didn't close her mouth, and by the way everybody laughed around her, they all seemed to think the same

"Please, don't make out until the ceremony is over, guys. We need you to look presentable" Steve told them, laughing

Ignoring their friends and family, they got closer to each other.

"Hi" Mike told her, a goofy smile plastered on his face. "You look..."

"Pretty?" El asked

"Beautiful, dazzling, gorgeous. Fuck, El, you're perfect" he told her, leaning down almost touching their foreheads

"You look amazing, too" El said while blushing

"Yeah yeah, we all look fucking great, now we need to go" Max told the couple, dragging El by her arm

Unfortunately for them, El wasn't paired with Mike. She would walk with Will, Karen with Tom, Mike with Nancy and Steve with Max. They got paired up and started walking to the aisle as soon as they heard the music start to play. While El was walking, she could see her dad's nervous face, which she found adorable. She gave him a big smile and an encouraging nod, to which he responded with a smile of his own. She also saw Dustin and Lucas, along with some familiar faces like Ted, Benny and Flo from the police station.

She stood in her position, being the one closest to the bride. Neither Joyce nor Jim had chosen a maid of honor or a best man, but they thought that their positions at the altar should be occupied by their kids. Holly then made her way through the aisle, which only meant Joyce was about to come. After some minutes of sheer expectation, Jonathan appeared at the beginning of the aisle, arm-in-arm with Joyce, who looked even more beautiful underneath the dim sunset light.

Her walk through the aisle was over as soon as it had started, and Joyce was soon in front of Jim. The adoration in their eyes could be seen from miles away, and El couldn't help but cry during the whole ceremony. Without realizing how much time had passed, it was already time for the vows

Joyce went first, not afraid to show her emotions. "Jim, there's no way I can tell you in words how much you mean to me and how happy you make me. I had never had good experiences with love, but right from the beginning this felt *right, meant to be*" When El heard that she looked at Tom, who nodded at her in confirmation, knowing what El was wondering. *Soulmates*. "I'm grateful for the way you love me every day of my life, you not only gave me your heart but you also gave me an amazing daughter, who I love as if she was my own. I can't wait to see what life brings us, even if it means having to put up with your grumpy face every morning" she told him with a watery laugh because of her tears. "With this ring, I promise to always take care of you and be there for you when you need me to. I promise to love you and hold you forever" she finished, putting the golden ring on Jim's finger

Then, it was Jim's turn. "Joyce, the nickname I call you is exactly what you are. You are my Joy, the one who makes me smile even when I had the worst day. You gave me a family, you and your amazing kids are as part of my heart as El is. I'm so happy I found you and that things worked out in the best way possible. I love you with all I am, I even love your morning out of tune singing. With this ring, I promise to always love you and respect you, no matter what happens. I'll always be your rock, and I promise we'll grow old together" he said, putting the ring on Joyce's finger

The ceremony was over then, the celebrator telling Jim he may kiss

the bride. Mike couldn't help thinking about how those would hopefully be El and him in the future, and the ring in his pocket suddenly felt too heavy.

The party started soon after, the waltz sounding through the speakers. Once Joyce and Jim had shared their first dance as a couple, it was time for everybody to join them. El was the first one after Joyce to dance with Jim, tears running down both their faces

"I'm so proud of you, dad" El told him. "Thank you for giving me the family I always wanted"

"It's what you deserve, Ellie. I love you so much, and I hope one day I'll get to walk you down the aisle to that tall boyfriend of yours"

The thought alone made El all giddy. It's not like she hadn't thought about it, but being in this situation only made things more real. She'd love to marry Mike one day, and she'd be ready whenever he was.

Some seconds later, Mike interrupted them to dance with El, and the wink Jim gave him didn't go unnoticed by her.

"What was that? Now my father and you have secrets, huh?" El teased

"I guess you could say that" Mike told El, leaning down and rubbing their noses together. "You're gorgeous, El, I hope you know that" he said, not letting her speak as he gave her a kiss which left them both lightheaded. *This is it, this is the moment*, he thought. He had her there, in his arms, and he didn't want to wait a second more.

Separating their lips, he spoke. "El, I..."

"Yeah?" she asked, moving some rebel hairs that had fallen down Mike's forehead

"I wanted to-"

"El! Stop sucking face with Mike and come here to dance with me" Lucas told her, exchanging her for Max. El reluctantly let go, giving him a look that meant 'we'll talk later'.

Max noticed Mike's disappointed and frustrated face. "What's got your panties in a twist, loverboy? Am I that bad of a company?" she asked

"No, no. It's just- I was gonna... I was about to propose to El" he said, scratching the back of his neck

"Holy shit, Wheeler! I'm so sorry we interrupted the moment" Max said, eyes wide and smiling apologetically

"Don't sweat it. I'll do it anytime soon" he told her, smiling at his friend. "What do you say, red? Care to join me for a dance?"

The rest of the party happened in a blur, everybody was having so much fun they didn't notice that it was already speech time. Tom came first and gave a hilarious speech, where he told everybody about his and Jim's adventures back in highschool. Then came Will and John's speech, who was emotive and sweet and didn't fail to make Joyce cry. Now, it was Mike and El's turn

"I remember the day I found out dad was dating someone" El began. "I was in the middle of what was kind of a life crisis, which I'll tell you all about another day." she said, laughing in complicity with Mike. "This guy right here" she said, signaling Mike "was having a rough time and it was hard for all of us. However, Joyce was just so nice to me that it didn't make me upset. Instead, it helped me go through that hard moment. Now, I love her with all my heart and she never ceases to amaze me with her kind heart and her wise words. She gave me two of the greatest people in life that I now have the pleasure to call my brothers, and she gave my father a new sense of happiness. I love you both so so much, and I hope you live your whole lives together in peace and harmony. You'll always have me around, that's my promise to you." She finished, tearing up a little as both her dad and Joyce started to do so

"I've known Joyce my whole life" Mike started. "She's an amazing, sweet woman who always took care of her sons and their friends. I always felt at home when I went to hang out with Will, she was like an aunt to me. And now we're kind of related, how cool is that?" he joked, making everybody laugh. "She deserves to be happy, and I'm one hundred percent sure that her happiness is with Jim." He smiled

at the couple. “Jim, you’re also an amazing person. You didn’t kill me when you found out I was dating your daughter, which is great, and you also gave me the greatest gift in life. I love El so, so much and I get to be with her because you were a superhero of a human and saved her life. I want you to know that by saving hers, you saved mine, too.” He continued, now focusing his gaze on El “She’s the most beautiful person that I’ve ever known, inside and out, and having her in my life is the biggest blessing of all times. Thank you for helping life put her in my way. I never want her to go away, *ever*, and because of that” he continued, kneeling on one knee in front of an awestruck El “I want to marry her, so that I can make sure this is forever. I never believed in love until I met you, El Hopper, and it would be the biggest honor to get to call you my wife. So El, love, sweetheart, would you marry me?” He finished, taking out the black velvet box with his trembling hands and revealing a silver ring with a small diamond on top. It was simple, but it was perfect because Mike was giving it to her.

Ignoring the shocked gasps and crying sounds that came from behind her, she threw herself into Mike’s arms, not caring about possibly getting her dress dirty. Mike was there, and he was as handsome as ever, and he was *hers*, and perfect and he was asking her to marry him.

She slammed her lips against Mike’s, mumbling yes a couple dozen times while smiling and laughing through her tears. Mike was laughing and crying, too, a mixture of relief and pure happiness erupting from deep within him. El wanted to *marry* him. She wanted to marry *him*. *I’m so lucky.*

They let go of each other for Mike to put the ring on El’s finger, a perfect fit. They were about to kiss again, but their friends and family were already next to them, helping them get up and congratulating them. Not a single person couldn’t see the obvious: with or without ring, it was going to be Mike and El forever.

That night, after having come back from the party and made love to each other, Mike could clearly see why having chosen to live was worth it. He had a good job, a big and bright apartment, a beautiful family, amazing friends, and the most gorgeous girl who just happened to be his fiancée by his side. Stroking El’s sleeping face

with his thumb, he slowly fell asleep.

That night in their dreams, they both dreamt of white gowns and black tuxedos, smiling faces and golden rings

That night, in their heads, it was them who got married instead of Jim and Joyce

That night, the thought was one step closer to becoming a reality

Notes for the Chapter:

Aaaaaaaaand it ended. Thank you guys so, so much for reading this. I wanted to keep writing fics but no ideas seem to come to my mind. I'm going on holidays for the next month so I won't be able to write, but if you have any ideas that you'd like to read you're more than welcomed to request them in the comments. I don't know if you'd like to read more from me, but I'd definitely love to have you as my readers.

I love all of you so much! Thanks for being the inspiration and the cause of this story.

Author's Note:

Hope you enjoyed this! I'd love to read what you thought of it in the comments. Let me know if you'd like me to continue this story.

Lots and lots of love and positivity,

Lu